SAVAGE
PARK AVENUE KINGS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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SAVAGE

PARK AVENUE KINGS

BOOK ONE

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Thank You
Special Thanks
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SYNOPSIS

He’s the shadow they send to make problems disappear.

Lachlan Stone thrives in the shadows, ruling his world of secrets and power with savage precision. As the most lethal of the Park Avenue Kings, he can’t afford the luxury of attachments. But when a mission takes an unexpected turn, he finds himself saving Cooper Patterson—a determined journalist who stumbles into a dangerous world far bigger than he ever imagined.

Cooper is everything Lachlan should avoid: relentless, curious, and far too tempting for his own good. Worse, his profession threatens to unravel everything Lachlan and his fellow Kings have built. Yet the pull between them is impossible to ignore, even as it sparks a firestorm of desire and danger.

With enemies closing in and the line between truth and lies growing thinner by the second, Lachlan must choose: protect his secrets, or risk it all for the man who sees the humanity in his darkness.

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1

LACHLAN

NOTHING GOOD HAPPENED after midnight. Not in a dark, trash-filled alley in Queens, anyway.

From my place high above on the edge of a building, I watched the men gathered below recoil against the bitter January wind, kicking away the debris that swirled around their ankles.

Only the classiest of meetups for drug dealers attempting to infiltrate our city. And while I didn't have an issue with anyone partaking in their sin of choice, these fuckers were lacing their shit. New on the scene, not under our rule, *and* sending New Yorkers to the morgue?

Fuck. That.

"Oh look, the rest of the tiny-dick brigade has arrived," Alessio said through my earpiece, watching the scene below through the camera on my trench coat.

I trained my binoculars on the new figures arriving in the shadows. Three guys looking twitchy as hell, hands in their pockets, ready to pull out a weapon at any sign of aggression from the four waiting. They faced off with each other, several feet between them, and from the mics and cameras I'd placed down in the alley, I knew Alessio was getting a much clearer view. Probably already had each of the assholes scanned and identified.

Words were exchanged, prices negotiated, and then the goods made their appearance.

"You getting this?" I said, keeping my voice low so it didn't carry on the wind.

“Callin’ me an amateur?”

“Just making sure I’m not freezing my ass off for no reason.”

“Hey, you’re the one who likes getting up close and personal with these assholes. Me, I prefer my cave.”

“Do you ever shut up?” I muttered. “I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Sounded to me like you were bitchin’ about freezin’ your balls off.”

I cursed under my breath as a particularly cold blast of air howled between the buildings, but Alessio was right—I had no one to blame but myself for being out here. When we’d caught news of the deal going down tonight, King had told us to set up a team to get eyes on the transaction and report back. But this was too important to just *send* someone. People were dying, and there was no way I was about to miss an opportunity to gather intel.

I wanted faces and names, wanted to know the players that were out doing the dirty work for these motherfuckers—but most importantly, I wanted the head of this snake, and if that meant freezing my balls off, then that’s what I’d do.

“I’m moving closer. I can’t see shit up here.”

“I’ve got eyes on them; you don’t have to— Lachlan.”

I tuned Alessio out and melted into the shadows, making my way toward the stairs of the fire escape, never more thankful to the city that didn’t sleep, the ever-present traffic the perfect soundtrack to mask any sound the wrought iron made under my feet.

One of the guys down below nodded as he looked at the small packet in his hand and then followed the group of four to the back of his nondescript panel van parked in the alley.

Wow, way to play to your typical stereotypes.

Three of the four stood guard, hands at their waists in an obvious make-a-move-we-don’t-like-and-we’ll-kill-you stance, as the fourth opened the doors and unzipped a black duffel bag.

My eyes caught on the small packets overflowing from the bag as I hung from the final floor’s fire escape. I glanced to the end of the alley, where a bus zoomed by, followed by an angry taxi horn or three, then dropped to the ground and hugged the side of the building.

One of the gun-loving trio turned in my direction, flexing his hand against the grip of his gun as some sixth sense kicked in and told him he

wasn’t the most dangerous thing in that alley. But when nothing *seemed* out of place, he went back to the deal at hand.

“Too close, Lachlan,” my backseat driver pointed out. “He almost spotted you.”

“Who’s calling who an amateur now? You got those face recs yet?”

“The Three Stooges, yep. I need the last one to turn around again.”

“What about the buyers?”

“Not facing the right way.”

“Fuckin’ hell.”

“So we gonna do this or what?” one of the buyers said as he glanced over his shoulder toward the street. His paranoia was becoming more apparent the longer the deal dragged out.

“As soon as you show the cash transfer,” Duffel Bag Guy said, gesturing toward the phone in the buyer’s hand. He turned on his cell and started to input information into what I assumed was an offshore account, and a couple seconds in, a sound from further up, in front of the van—a trash can, maybe—echoed off the buildings around us.

Everyone froze.

“What the fuck was that?”

My head whipped in the direction of the sound, and Alessio said, “Looks like someone else wants to crash this party.”

I started to demand he elaborate on what the cameras were seeing, but then I noticed a head of hair jerk back, trying to blend in with the shadows.

“Any chance they’ll think it was a cat?” Alessio said.

But two of the men were already heading in that direction, guns drawn.

“Nope.”

Whoever had been spying was obviously not a professional at it, and they easily dragged him from his hiding spot.

One of the men growled, “You fuckin’ spying on us?”

The spy started to shake his head and say no, but the man holding him by his shirt tightened his grip and brought his face in close.

“Just spending a quiet night in an alley with the rats, huh?”

“He looks like a rat,” the other one sneered.

With his face turned up in the moonlight, I finally got a better look at the man who didn’t belong there. And he definitely didn’t look like a rodent. He looked like a fucking Boy Scout.

I’d expected whoever was hiding behind a dumpster to look strung out, but this guy was clean-cut and dressed casually in dark jeans, a jacket, and sneakers. There was an appropriate amount of fear in his eyes given the situation he’d found himself in, though there was more going on here than a simple wrong place, wrong time.

Whoever he was, he hadn’t come prepared for confrontation—something that became painfully obvious when they dragged him to the back of the van and patted him down for weapons.

“I don’t have anything—”

“We’ll be the judge of that.” The one with the cruel sneer ran his gloved hand over the front of the guy’s jacket, parting the material to pat down his chest. “What about down here? You packin’?” He lowered his hand to the front of the intruder’s jeans, and when the guy struggled to get free, my adrenaline began to kick in.

“Don’t do it, man,” Alessio warned. “I mean it—this doesn’t involve you.”

Didn’t matter. It was one thing for these assholes to conduct their business and fuck each other over, another to have an innocent get involved. He shouldn’t be here, and I could see every one of his regrets flashing across that attractive face of his.

“What the fuck’s taking so long?” the driver of the van grumbled, sticking his head out the window. “Wrap this shit up or we’re out.”

One of the goons cocked his gun and aimed it at the guy’s head.

“Oh come on, not the head. That shit’s too messy,” the one holding him said.

“No, please, I won’t say anything, just let me go.” The guy tried again to break free.

“Sorry. No can do.”

A growl tore out of my chest.

“Lachlan,” Alessio said, “King will have your balls for breakfast if you—”

I ripped the earpiece out, shoved it in my pocket, and grabbed one of the throwing stars instead and aimed it at the shithead holding tight to the intruder.

He wouldn’t be for long.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent it flying, and it hit true, striking his neck and causing several reactions that all happened in a heartbeat.

The man caught in the carotid artery let go, reaching up at his neck as he backed away. The innocent's legs swayed unsteadily before he dropped, his knees hitting the ground with a thud and his phone falling out of his jacket and skidding across the pavement. The gun thug spun around, aiming the muzzle in my direction, but I was already on him, grabbing the barrel with one hand and landing a hard, fast strike to his wrist.

The gun was in my possession before the rest of the men standing at the back of the van even knew what was happening. They scrambled for their weapons, a couple of them cursing before diving into the van like the pussies they were.

I aimed the gun at the remaining men.

"Now," I said, words low and slightly muffled behind the mask I wore. "We can do this the easy way…or the hard way."

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2

COOPER

SO THIS WAS what it was like to stare death down and wonder what the hell was going to happen next.

I'd always been curious. I'd even researched it once—not because I was morbid but because my journalism course had led me down the path of UFOs and the afterlife in university for a few months—and now here I was getting firsthand knowledge, and I suddenly realized it was nothing at *all* like what I expected.

I'd been told about bright lights, warmth, and feelings of love encompassing your being. Of being greeted by friends and family who were there to welcome you and assure you that everything was all right.

I'd also heard about voids. Blackness. Silence and nothingness.

But none of that was happening right now.

Not even close.

Instead, I found myself staring up at a tall, masked, hooded figure who'd just melted out of the shadows, and as a fan of the movie *Ghost* I was starting to get worried I'd done something really shitty in my life that I couldn't remember until…

The high-pitched whistling of something flying through the air caught my attention right before the thug who had a death grip on me cried out and let me go. My knees gave out and I hit the ground with a hard *whack*.

Fuck, definitely not dead, if the pain shooting through my left knee was anything to go by. But that was quickly forgotten as the masked figure bore down on the man who'd just been holding a gun to my head.

Quick as lightning, the hooded man gripped the muzzle of the gun, disarming my wannabe murderer faster than I could blink, which sent the rest of the dealers scrambling to escape. Whoever this was, they clearly had training, the lethal kind—or maybe they were some kind of avenging angel sent here to save me. I wasn't being dragged off to some underworld. This wasn't the end of my life as I knew it. I was being saved.

By a masked vigilante.

My eyes locked on to black boots, then traveled up long legs as the hooded man stopped beside me and aimed a gun at the cowards trying to work out how someone had gotten the jump on their dumb asses.

"Now. We can do this the easy way…or the hard way."

The deep voice sent a shiver skating up my spine, as my savior revealed at least one thing about *him*self. He was a man.

The kickass, take-no-names, fear-nothing kind of man who instantly made people back up a step. Yet here I was, paralyzed at his feet feeling nothing but safe.

Safe, in a cold, dark alley where I'd just had a gun pointed at my head.

What the hell was wrong with me?

"Get up."

What? Oh, he's talking to me.

My eyes flicked to my phone, and I swiped it up and shoved it in my pocket as I clambered to my feet. He angled his body in front of mine as he kept the gun trained on the dealers.

A couple of them chose the easy way he'd offered and dropped their weapons, but the others looked riled up and ready for a fight. I briefly wondered whether I'd be able to shoot straight if I managed to get my hands on one of the firearms that had been kicked toward us, but the bigger question was, would I actually pull the trigger?

Before I had a chance to think that through, the masked man issued another order.

"Go."

One of the dealers started to move, but the masked man's growl stopped him in his tracks.

"Not you." He cocked his head slightly. "Go home, Scout. Run."

I didn't even have time to wonder why he was calling me Scout, because it was clear that shit was about to pop off and if I didn't want to be on the wrong end of a gun again, I needed to get gone.

I backed away, almost tripping over myself in my haste to leave, but I didn't dare turn my back on any of them. Not yet.

A deep, reverberating snarl echoed through the alley seconds before the masked man made his move, charging the group with a series of maneuvers that incapacitated each of them, one by one. Somehow the hood on his trench coat didn't move, staying perfectly in place to conceal his identity as he brought the men to their knees. Their cries didn't last long before being cut off with a swiftness, and I couldn't tell if they'd been knocked out temporarily or…well, something else.

As I reached the end of the alley, I watched the masked man grip the final thug standing by the neck, and this time he was facing in my direction so I could see the moonlight gleaming off his mask. In a move so quick I couldn't tell how he did it, he snapped his wrist to the right and the dealer fell like a rag doll at his feet.

My breath caught in my throat as the hooded man looked in my direction. I couldn't see his eyes, but it felt like they were still somehow holding me in a trance.

You need to get out of here. Run, like he said.

The sound of the van's engine starting broke our stare. He took off toward the driver, and my feet finally became unglued from the pavement.

I turned away and began to run, the pain in my knee an afterthought as I focused on getting somewhere safe.

Queens wasn't my neck of the woods, and in my rush to get away, I hadn't retraced my steps. It was probably better that way. I didn't need anyone following me—if anyone was still alive to do so.

Shivers racked my body, and I pulled my jacket tighter around me with shaking hands. There was a subway stop up ahead, and I ran toward it, looking behind me every few steps until I reached the safety of the stairs leading underground.

Ha. Safety. It wasn't like the men I'd followed tonight had any respect for rules, and if anyone *was* still following me, I wouldn't put it past them to end me anywhere at anytime.

No. That's not happening. He took care of them. No one is following you.

I continued looking over my shoulder anyway, even as I pushed through the turnstile and followed the signs to head back into Manhattan.

Shit, maybe I should've stayed close by for when the cops came. I'd gotten a few photos of the deal going down before losing my balance trying to get a clearer shot and knocking into the dumpster hard enough to cause a scene. That was evidence they could use. Or maybe I should go to the police department in Manhattan instead and say it hadn't been safe for me to stay.

And then what? They'd ask me how I got away and I tell them some masked vigilante saved me? They'd think I'd lost my mind and watched too many superhero movies.

Hell, maybe I had.

I ran an ice-cold hand over my face as the train came screaming to a stop, and then boarded a car that wasn't completely empty. For some reason, being alone in a train car seemed like a bad idea.

People had warned me about coming to New York, that I wasn't cut out for the big city, but I'd brushed that aside, believing they were imparting their own fears on me. After tonight, however, I was starting to think there might be some truth to it.

The last thing I'd expected was to get caught up in an action scene that belonged in a *John Wick* film. But maybe that was my own fault, following some seriously bad guys. That was my job, though, to track down the important stories, and this one was particularly important—and apparently particularly dangerous.

I let out a sigh and collapsed onto a seat, trying to block out the fear as the train headed back to my side of the city, and where I thought my mind would be filled with terror over what I'd just been through, all I could seem to think about was—who was the man behind the mask?

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3

LACHLAN

TONIGHT HADN'T BEEN the stay-out-of-sight surveillance I'd intended, that was for damn sure. But when had I ever been a play-by-the-rules kind of guy? It would've been more inconvenient to stand back and watch some innocent get his head blown off than it had been to get involved. Half of those idiots were cracked out on their own supply anyway, so incapacitating them didn't give me any of the enjoyment I'd usually get from a challenge.

Good thing I'd gotten rid of Alessio's voice in my ear. If I hadn't, he'd be giving me shit the whole trip back to Libertine headquarters, and then I'd end up crushing the earpiece with my boot. Yet again.

I stared out the back passenger window of the car taking me back into Manhattan and wondered where the Boy Scout had run off to. His lack of street smarts screamed that he wasn't from here, or he'd know better than to hide behind a dumpster to tail drug dealers.

Which raised the question, why was he there in the first place?

No, it was none of my business. I'd met my quota on helping someone out, and whatever happened to him now wasn't any of my concern. Boy Scout would have to learn to make better decisions or at least be a bit stealthier about them.

Closing my eyes, I settled back into the leather seat, but I'd be damned if his face didn't flash through my mind. The fear in his eyes as they'd latched on to mine, followed by the shock when he fell to his knees without a bullet hole piercing his body. The curiosity rearing its head again when he

started to run away, but turned back to watch me. Were his eyes brown or blue? It'd been too dark to tell, but now I wondered—

Wait, what the fuck. *What color are his eyes?* Jesus Christ, had I let someone hit me in the head tonight?

Annoyed at where my thoughts had gone, I shoved open the car door when it stopped at a traffic light a couple of blocks from Libertine.

"I'll walk," I said, and then slammed the door. Obviously I hadn't burned off *all* of my adrenaline, and the cold air cleared my head as I hopped onto the sidewalk. The mask I'd slipped into my trench coat pocket after leaving the alley bounced against my thigh with every step I took, reminding me of what I'd risked tonight. If Boy Scout had gotten a glimpse of me without it, I would've been in much deeper shit than I already was.

That was one of the main reasons King had wanted me to send a team and not deal with those assholes myself—discretion. The number one rule when it came to Libertine was anonymity, and being caught disposing of a group of drug dealers in some back alley wasn't exactly discreet.

But I'd been careful. My mask had held. Boy Scout had looked at me like I was some figment of his overactive imagination, and I had no doubt he'd be questioning what he'd seen for the rest of the night. Hell, maybe his life.

I turned down the street where Libertine's headquarters were situated, made my way toward the nondescript black door of the main building, and gave a couple knocks.

Could I have taken my time returning to base and gone to grab a drink or five? Sure, but I had a feeling that would've made the impending ass chewing even worse. So I figured the best course of action was to get inside, track down Alessio, and see if we could do some damage control before the bossman showed.

A small panel in the wood slid open at eye level, and when security saw me it immediately slid shut, and the bolts inside were turned so the heavy door could be opened.

"Good evening, Mr. Stone."

I acknowledged the greeting with a clipped nod as I stepped inside and unbuttoned my coat, handing it over so it could be hung in the members' coat closet.

"Would you like me to inform anyone of your arrival?"

“I think I’m going to go with the element of surprise tonight.” Why not stick with the theme of the evening?

“Of course, sir.”

I glanced at the main entrance of the club, and while it was tempting to head inside and lose myself in whatever debauchery I could find, I knew I wouldn’t enjoy myself with the inevitable reprimand looming over my head.

Instead, I headed toward the imposing wrought-iron door at the far end of the entryway. Its impressive height and weight made it impenetrable to anyone who didn’t have the right key. Lucky for me, I wasn’t just anyone.

I pushed up the sleeve of my suit jacket and held my wrist to a scanner on the wall, and as soon as it detected the microchip under my skin, mechanical locks began to whir and jolt.

The mammoth door yawned open, and I stepped inside and headed underground, leaving behind the world outside.

Torches flickered along the stone walls as I descended into a place only seven of us could go freely. The heart of the Libertine society pulsed between the cavernous rooms that occupied our private space. The floors above served the needs and desires of all members, but down here, decisions were made that affected not only our domain, but the entire world.

That wasn’t an overstatement, either.

Tyrone “King” Kingston had assembled a handful of us, men he trusted, men of different backgrounds, specialties, and influence, to wield power for the greater good. Which didn’t always mean coloring within the lines.

I headed to Alessio’s “office,” which was a strict “look but don’t touch” zone. Computer monitors took up the entirety of one stone wall, along with tech gadgets meticulously stored in a way that only he understood. He was methodical to the point of OCD, and it was terrifying what he could do with the click of a button. For that reason, he was the one we all went to in order to get us out of any…*situations* that arose.

None of the offices had doors, just wide, curved openings, so I had a perfect view of Alessio as I went to place a bottle of whiskey on the corner of his desk.

“Not. There.” Annoyance laced his voice as he turned in his chair to face me, and I handed the bottle to him instead.

“Fine. Here. Consider this my peace offering.” I crossed my arms and nodded at the bottle in his hand as I leaned against the entrance. “There.

We're even now."

"That would be true if you hadn't cut off all communication."

I reached into my pocket, grabbed the earpiece, and tossed it in his direction. "It fell out."

"Bullshit. You took it out. Question is, did you break it this time?" He inspected the earpiece with narrowed eyes.

"I was tempted, but no."

He grunted in response, but set the earpiece carefully in its place. Then he looked me over and tucked a long strand of his hair behind his ear.

"How the hell does your suit look like you just took it off the hanger after the shit you've been through tonight?"

This coming from a man who considered boots, jeans, and a black shirt appropriate for any occasion.

"Skill. It's all about skill."

"Uh huh. Yet you're down here handing out gifts like Santa fucking Claus, so I'm assuming your skills only go so far. Seems like you might need something from me." Alessio leaned back in his chair and propped his booted feet up on the desk. "I wonder what that could be? Wiped video? Audio? The sudden disappearance of any evidence that you might have single-handedly annihilated the very people we needed to get closer to the head honcho bringing laced drugs into our city?"

When he put it like that, I could see why he might've warned me against getting involved. But what did he expect? For me to stand by and let some passerby get caught up in that shitshow?

We weren't about that, and Alessio knew it. So did King, for that matter. So if I could wipe the videos before *he* showed, then maybe when he found out in a day or two I could explain it was for the greater good and all that he held dear.

"Can you do it?" I pushed off the wall and stepped further inside Alessio's cave.

"Are you tryin' to piss me off?" He dragged his feet off the desk. "Can I do it…"

The next thing I knew, the screens filled with the playback of the trash-filled alley, the assholes I'd taken down, and the terrified bystander. The audio cut out at the exact moment Alessio was trying to talk some sense into me, and then all hell broke loose.

All in all, the sequence of events went by much faster than it'd seemed when it was actually taking place, and when it started up again on a loop, I interjected.

"Okay, that's enough, I don't think we need to see it again—"

"Ooh, see *what* again? Are you two hiding a secret?" The smooth, lyrical tone, practically salivating at the idea of gossip, told me exactly who was standing behind us without my even turning. But a glance over my shoulder confirmed the cashmere-covered man strolling into the room was none other than Benoit Olivier.

"Not a secret," Alessio said. "More like a fuck-up. Lachlan's, to be precise."

I tried to give him a quick uppercut to the back of the head, which he dodged. "I didn't fuck up. I just overextended myself."

"In a way that you now need to erase?" Benoit tsked. "That sounds like a fuck-up to me, *mon cher*."

"It's nothing that will exist in a matter of seconds." I shot Alessio a meaningful look.

But he proved to be a true asshole, shooting me a wink as he hit play on the video.

"Oh my," Benoit said, his mouth curving as he watched the replay. "I take it acting like some superhero of New York wasn't officially on tonight's agenda?"

"That's not what I was doing," I grumbled.

"Oh, you're right. You *did* let the driver get away."

"Well, in case you missed it, I was kind of busy *saving a life*."

Benoit cocked his head at the screen. "Hmm, yes, I do believe that attractive man's head looks much better on his body than blown clear across the street."

Alessio snorted. "Attractive? Of course that's what you notice first."

"It would've been a shame to ruin such a handsome face." Benoit glanced at me. "Don't you think so, Lachlan?"

"Like I give a shit." It wasn't Boy Scout's good looks that made me get involved.

Though, seeing him onscreen now, I could see why they'd make that leap. He *was* more attractive than I'd noticed in the moment, but I was a little busy then.

“Wipe the fucking cameras before King gets here or I swear to God I’ll—”

“You’ll do what, exactly?”

King’s deep baritone came from directly behind me, and I closed my eyes and sent up a litany of curses.

When I opened them again, I saw Benoit’s lips pressed into a thin line, like he was trying not to laugh that I’d just gotten busted.

I slowly turned around and met King’s gaze. His commanding presence made him feel so much taller than his six-foot frame, and those dark eyes betrayed nothing, making him incredibly hard to read most of the time.

Not that it took a genius to know he wasn’t going to like what I was up to.

Oh fucking well. It wasn’t like I had regrets.

I crossed my arms and said, “I interfered in tonight’s reconnaissance. Things were about to get ugly, I intervened, and then I tried to buy off Alessio to wipe the cameras so you didn’t find out.”

King didn’t bat an eye. “Looks like I got here just in time, then.”

“Come on, I wasn’t gonna do it,” Alessio said from behind me, but every one of us knew that was a crock of bullshit.

King looked at Benoit. “And you? What’s your part in this deception taking place?”

Benoit held his hands up. “*Moi?* I’m just an innocent bystander. You know me, anything messy is a nonstarter.”

“Messy?” King’s jaw locked as his focus shifted back to me. “What does he mean by *messy*?”

There was no point in lying, not when my actions were right there on screen. But before I could form an answer, King held a hand up and nodded to Alessio.

“Play it back.”

I knew there was no way in hell Alessio was about to take my side. With the chain of command, we *always* deferred to our leader—or as we’d recently started calling him thanks to his new boyfriends, our “King.”

“Yes, my King.”

I groaned inwardly as Alessio turned to his screens, his sarcasm not helping me out here. Especially with the way King’s jaw was keeping time like a damn metronome.

Everyone in the room was so still we could've been carved out of the stone surrounding us, then the screens lit up with the playback for yet another time and I took the lead role in my silent film.

Several agonizing minutes later, the feed ended and the screens went dark.

I could practically hear the wheels turning in King's head as he continued to stare at the blank screens, and I knew the smart move would be to apologize. I should swallow my pride, admit my insubordination, and let him know it wouldn't happen again. But we'd both know I was lying.

I didn't do well following orders or hanging back in the shadows—it had always been the hardest part of this role for me. But I tried to curb my baser instincts out of respect for Libertine's rules. I succeeded for the most part, too—usually.

But tonight I hadn't cared whose orders I was following. The whole point of tracking down those dealers had been to stop more New Yorkers from ending up in the morgue. So how the hell had King expected me to allow one more—one who didn't deserve it?

"You were supposed to stay under the radar. Remember the motto of 'don't get fucking caught.'"

Okay, that chafed. "I didn't get caught."

"No?" King slowly turned toward me and took a step into my space. "Then what the *fuck* am I looking at on that screen, Lachlan?"

King's fierce stare held me in place. This wasn't a man you dared mess with—not even me.

"Alessio doesn't count."

"And what if someone else had cameras? What about the driver? This was sloppy, unplanned, and reckless."

"No one saw my face—"

"But they *could* have," King growled, the sound ominous like thunder. "One fuck-up, that's all it takes. One fuck-up and you risk us all. This was careless, and you're better than that."

I cursed under my breath, but didn't argue, because he was right.

"Wipe it," King said. "Then do a grid search and make sure there's no city cameras we're missing floating around. Send a message to the ground crew to look for any kind of home surveillance that might've spotted anything. As for you"—he spun back to me—"stay the hell away from me until I've calmed the fuck down. Is that clear?"

“As crystal.”

King turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, and I looked at Benoit, who let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Good thing he’s not the ‘off with his head’ kind of King or yours would’ve been rolling, *mon cher*.”

No doubt. But I wasn’t about to let it bother me. It wasn’t the first time I’d been on King’s shitlist, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“I just love getting my ass chewed out because of someone else’s fuck-up. Thanks for that.”

I rounded back on Alessio. “That’s what you’re worried about? *My* balls just got busted because *you* dragged your damn feet, asshole.”

He snorted. “If your balls were busted you’d be crying on the floor, so quit your bitchin’—I don’t have time for it. I have to get to work erasing your…indiscretions.”

He spun back to the screens, and when he pressed a button on his keyboard and the feed came back up, a still of Boy Scout appeared front and center and I said, “Wait a second.”

Alessio glanced back at me, his hand frozen above his keyboard.

“Can you find out who that is?”

“Why do you care? He’s fine, you saved him, there’s no reason to—”

“Just find out who the fuck it is, would you?” I cocked my head and said the one thing I knew would spur Alessio into action. “Unless you don’t think you *can*…”

His eyes darkened at those fighting words, and just as I’d predicted, he cracked his knuckles and turned back to his keyboard.

“You’ll know within the hour.”

I smirked and turned to leave, but as I made it through the entrance, I heard Benoit chuckle. “But he didn’t notice how attractive the man was…”

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4

COOPER

THE COMMUTE TOOK forever. By the time I made it to the Lower East Side I was hobbling, my left knee screaming with every step I took. Not like I could've braced myself better for the fall—I had been too busy coming to terms with the fact that I was about to die.

Once again, I looked around me, hoping like hell no one had followed. I had a feeling paranoia was going to be my friend for a long, long time.

As I reached what was now "home," I stopped in front of the barbershop that took up the bottom floor of the tenement building I lived in and sighed. Of course the only place I'd found in my price range was a tiny-ass fifth-floor walkup. The square footage was about the same as my closet back in Colorado, but it didn't matter. It was about location here, not space, and this was where I needed to be.

Tipping my head back, I sucked in a deep breath of air, holding it in so the cold burned my lungs.

I didn't even know how to begin to process what had happened tonight. If I could. It was beyond anything I'd ever experienced, and being a journalist had taken me down some shady roads in the past. All I could hope was that I'd gotten a few good shots of their faces, so I could—

Wait. Shit. There was no point in finding out their identities now or continuing to follow them, was there? The man in the mask had taken care of every last one of them, and judging by the way none of them had been moving by the time I left the alley, I could guess what that meant.

My heart began to pound faster as the reality of the situation hit.

Oh God. Had I really been a witness to murder?

No, I thought, forcing my eyes open. *No, he just incapacitated them so they wouldn't kill* me.

Though, truth be told, I didn't give two shits if they died. Maybe that was callous, but those men were the scum of the earth. They were killing people.

They were killing…*my* people.

I swallowed hard and tried not to think about that, at least not until I was in my apartment. As I reached for my key, I briefly considered attempting to climb the fire escape so I could avoid the confrontation that was about to happen, but the hope that maybe my landlord had taken a strong sleeping pill to knock her ass out all night had me heading for the door instead.

As I slipped inside, I could hear the sound of late night infomercials coming from her door and prayed that meant she wouldn't hear the creak of the stairs as I headed up—

"Skulking around in the middle of the night. I knew you were bad news."

Swallowing a sigh, I turned around and gave Edith Wilson a tight smile. No doubt she'd been watching the entrance with her hawklike eyes. She was every bit the ill-tempered old lady who ruled the roost in her front-snap dressing gown.

"Now, Ms. Edith, if I were bad news, you wouldn't have generously let me rent an apartment from you."

She grunted and narrowed her eyes to slits. "I'm reconsidering that generosity. I don't put up with good-for-nothings."

"I can assure you it's nothing like that. It's just such a big, confusing city, and I went out exploring and got a little lost."

"Of course you did. I told you, Kentucky boy—"

"Colorado."

"—that small-towners get eaten in this city." She pursed her lips and looked me up and down. "Try not to get eaten." She went to close her door and added, "Or do," before slamming it shut.

That was officially the shortest interaction we'd ever had, which was something to be grateful for on this night from hell. Ms. Edith was the nosiest landlord in the city, of that I was positive, and it didn't matter if it

was two p.m. or two a.m., she wasn't popping her head out to say anything nice.

Again, it didn't matter as long I was here and I had a roof over my head. I could deal with crankiness.

I trudged up to the fifth floor with my knee protesting the whole way. Once inside, I flicked on the light, went straight for the world's tiniest fridge, and wrapped some ice in a towel, needing to get off my leg so I wouldn't be limping around the city for days.

Opting for my bed over the desk and chair I had pushed up against the wall, I hopped over to it and kicked out of my shoes. I was too tired and too damn sore to bother undressing the rest of the way, and merely flopped down onto the harder-than-I-liked mattress that took up the majority of the space in the tiny studio.

It was ridiculous for a thirty-year-old to be living like a frat boy, and under normal circumstances I wouldn't have entertained the thought. But this wasn't a normal circumstance. In fact, any sense of normal had vanished from my life a couple of months ago when a friend overdosed on a new drug that had entered the Colorado party scene.

Ever since then I'd made it my mission to track down the source, to expose the people responsible and take that information to the cops. But that new mission had driven me from my comfortable life to this unfamiliar one.

I stared up at the fan and light overhead, and then my eyes shifted to the flaking paint curling off the ceiling. *What the hell am I doing here?*

I'd known the city would be overwhelming. That the people I was looking into were dangerous. But tonight had been beyond anything I ever could've imagined when I first decided to move out here.

Drugs, guns, a masked vigilante? It was like some horrible nightmare I was trapped inside where I almost got my head blown off. Except it was no nightmare, just a really fucked-up reality.

I squeezed my eyes shut and shifted on the bed, and when my phone dug into my hip I cursed and reached into my pocket to pull it out. As the cell came free, I was about to toss it on the mattress beside me when I spotted something silver stuck to the bottom.

The light reflected off the rectangular metal card as I shuffled up the bed and leaned back against the wall.

Huh, where did this come from?

It wasn’t mine, that was for damn sure. But then where—

Oh fuck. The alley…

I pried the card off the back of my phone, realizing it was stuck due to a magnet. That moment in the alley when I’d dropped my phone—it must have attached to whatever the hell this was, and when I picked it back up in the middle of all that chaos, I hadn’t noticed it.

Whatever *it* was.

I turned the small card over, and when a familiar symbol at the top came into view, my breath left me like I’d been sucker-punched in the gut. There, staring back at me, was the same symbol I’d seen on the drugs my friend had taken. The same symbol I was trying to find out more about. One of the dealers must’ve dropped it tonight.

I flipped it over, looking to see if there were any other discernible markings, any other clues, but there was nothing.

Maybe it was a key? Like those hotel ones. But what did it open? Someone’s place? A stash house? Or maybe it was an access card to a facility. Or a safe? The possibilities were endless. The one thing I *did* know was that it belonged to the same people who’d supplied my friend the laced drugs. The same assholes who’d held a gun to my head tonight.

I let out a sigh, frustration riding me as I thought about how close I’d been to learning more information, only to have it snatched away from me due to a stupid misstep. But then again, maybe not. The masked vigilante had appeared from the shadows as though he’d been watching the deal in that alley too.

I wasn’t naïve enough to believe he’d been scouring the streets of Queens looking for people to save. That kind of thing didn’t happen in real life. So maybe he’d been there for something altogether different and I’d gotten in *his* way. Maybe he’d been there to steal the drugs. Or to get a story, like me.

I snorted. *Yeah, right.* No reporter I knew would know how to wield weapons I’d only ever seen in spy movies. Who the hell carried around throwing stars on the off chance they actually needed to *throw* one?

But damn he’d been impressive. Like my own personal savior in kickass boots, a wicked-hot trench coat that held all those deadly weapons, and an intricate face mask that looked to be made out of black metal. It all probably should’ve terrified me, but now that I thought back, it only made him that much more mysterious and…sexy.

I couldn’t stop from wondering who he was. Where he lived. What he did in the light of day. But maybe it was better that I didn’t know. The less I knew, the less I was any kind of threat. It wasn’t like I was ever going to see him again, or at least that was the hope. One almost-fatal encounter was enough for me.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t try to work out what this card was or what it accessed. It just meant that this time, I’d have to be a bit more careful in how I went about it.

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5

LACHLAN

THIS WAS A bad idea.

A *really* fucking bad idea.

But when had that ever stopped me from doing what I wanted? That would be never, and also one of the reasons I was at the very top of our illustrious leader's shit list. It was also the reason I was keeping my current "project" off the books, so to say.

The last thing I needed while researching the potential problem of Boy Scout was Alessio keeping tabs on me—and that was all I was doing, making sure Mr. Wrong Place Wrong Time wasn't going to turn into a problem.

At least, that's what I was telling myself. Or trying to, anyway, because if that had been the real reason I was here, sitting in some yuppie-ass coffee shop where they sold drinks that you could personally create on the spot like an annoying douchebag then I'd tell Alessio where I was.

But I'd kept it a secret. I'd kept my *interest* in him—Cooper Patterson—a secret.

Ever since Alessio had handed over his name and the information I'd asked for, I'd become a man obsessed, and that wasn't like me. Not even a little bit.

A job was a job. That was how I'd always looked at what I did both privately and publicly at Stone Security, the company I'd started over a decade earlier. It was the "front," the day job that allowed me the power, money, and influence to be a part of Libertine. As the head of the leading

authority around the globe for support to governments, corporations, and individuals, it was imperative to be levelheaded and not let emotions cloud my judgment.

So what the fuck was I doing here now?

Oh, right, Cooper's face wouldn't leave my mind. Those wide eyes filled with fear were a constant vision in my head, and at first I'd told myself I was following him to make sure he was okay. That I wanted to make sure no one came after him for retaliation. But that was a fucking lie too.

Not that I was all that concerned about the driver. What kind of a pussy ran from a fight? I mean, yeah, his buddies had been lying on the ground, but still…

It was time to start admitting why I'd trailed Cooper from his home to this coffee shop two days in a row, and then all over the city whenever he got lost and had to make his way back to what I had no doubt was a closet posing as an apartment.

I wanted to know more. I had no *business* wanting that. But I wanted it anyway.

It was clear he didn't have a job, or nothing permanent anyway, and yet he came to this spot every day, where he spent hours doing something on his laptop.

What? I had no idea. Alessio's intel had revealed he was a journalist but didn't have a job yet. So was he freelancing? Was he writing a story about what had happened to him hoping he could submit it for a job? Or maybe he was writing about a certain someone who'd saved him.

Either way, that would be disastrous for me, which brought me back to my current idea. The really bad one.

The bells over the coffee shop door sounded, and sure as the clock on the wall said eight thirty, Cooper Patterson stepped inside. Today he wore a knit beanie pulled down low, which he promptly took off as he headed across the café to join the line.

Aaand that was my cue.

Leaving my coat over the chair to hold my claim on the table, I stood behind Cooper, who was too busy perusing the daily bakery specials to notice anyone around him.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. His eyes darted to the door every few seconds, like he expected someone to be following him.

Right behind you.

Like a stalker.

The line moved quickly, and once Cooper placed his order for a croissant and cappuccino, I was up. I hadn't even bothered glancing at the menu, and the word "cappuccino" left my mouth before I could stop it.

If any of the Kings could see me now… *Jesus*.

Cooper didn't notice as I sidled in beside him at the pick-up counter, glancing instead over his shoulder at the door. With his attention elsewhere, I took advantage of being so close and ran my gaze over him. This close, he smelled irresistible, but more than that, he *looked* it. His hair was a lighter brown in the sun, and he kept his face smooth and clean-shaven, which made him look a little younger than thirty. The one thing I hadn't gotten a clear read on yet was his eyes, and even though I shouldn't, I wanted them focused on me.

"Cappuccino," the barista called out, and I reached for the to go-cup at the same time as Cooper.

"I think that's—" His eyes widened as he looked up at me, and he let go.

Blue. That was the answer to the lingering question I'd had. Light blue eyes under strong brows that made him more attractive up close than I'd realized, even after all the time spent following him the last few days.

This was a monumentally bad fuck-up.

But it was too late for regrets.

I held his gaze and picked up the coffee, just as the barista called out, "Cappuccino for Stone."

"Looks like I grabbed yours by mistake," I said, and glanced at the name on the cup. "Cooper?"

He blinked and then seemed to find his words. "Uh, yeah. That's me."

"Sorry about that." I handed him the coffee, making sure our fingers touched—because I was a glutton for punishment, obviously.

"Oh, no problem. It happens, right?" He smiled at me then, a friendly, interested smile that had me realizing this brief interaction wasn't going to be enough.

I was so fucked for this.

"Croissant for Cooper," the barista called out, stealing Cooper's attention as he reached for the to-go bag. I grabbed my own coffee and

didn’t miss the way he glanced past me at the table in the corner that he usually commandeered.

The one I just happened to have my coat thrown over.

Coincidence? Absolutely not.

All it took was seeing the disappointment flash across his face for me to make him an offer.

“Care to join me?” I said, nodding toward the table. “If you’re not rushing off to work or to meet someone, of course.”

“No, I’m not meeting—” He stopped and glanced down at the floor, biting back a smile before he looked up at me. “I mean, sure.”

One side of my lips curved, and I inclined my head for him to follow me, even though that was the last thing he should be doing. The last thing *I* should be inviting. There was no reason for me to get further involved, to ask questions, to know anything more about him than what Alessio had given me.

But here I was sitting down opposite the one man I knew I should be avoiding.

Cooper pulled his chair out and took a seat, his cheeks a soft pink as he played with the coffee cup in his hands, his eyes glued to the table.

I wonder if that’s from nerves or the warmth of the fire crackling in the corner? Either way, it made him even more appealing than I’d first thought.

“So, um…” Cooper swallowed as his eyes finally found mine across the table. “I didn’t catch your name back there.”

“That’s because I didn’t give it.” I leaned back in my seat and ran my finger along the lip of the cup. “But if you ask me nicely, I could be persuaded.”

Cooper chuckled, and his cheeks turned a deep crimson. “Nicely, huh?”

“Uh huh.”

“That hardly seems fair. You got mine, no trouble at all.”

Now that was a laugh. I’d gotten into a world of trouble saving him and learning his name, and if King knew I was currently sitting in some hipster café with him then I’d be in deep fucking shit.

“Who said anything about trouble?” I sat forward and picked up my coffee to take a sip. “I said if you ask me *nicely.* But…if trouble is what you’re looking for, I’m not averse to that either.”

Cooper’s eyes darkened at my blatant come-on, and if I wasn’t actually sitting here I wouldn’t believe the stuff coming out of my mouth.

Was I *flirting* with him?

Yeah, that's exactly what I was fucking doing. It'd just been so long that I hardly recognized it. But with his blue eyes focused on my mouth, his fingers rubbing up and down the side of his cup, and the tip of his tongue wetting his lower lip, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

Cooper sat back from me, almost as if he didn't trust himself—or maybe me, which was a more likely and accurate scenario.

"Okay, so what constitutes 'nice'?"

I gave a wolfish smile, and something in my expression must've tipped him off to my thoughts, because he shook his head.

"Or do I not want to know?"

"Depends." I shrugged and took another sip of my coffee. "How badly do you want to know my name?"

Cooper snorted and tapped the side of his cup. "You're very cocky, has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yes. All the time."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"No, why would it?"

"I…I don't know, actually. It just seems like it might get you in trouble."

"Ah, there's that word again." I stretched my legs out under the table, and when my foot grazed the side of his calf, Cooper sucked in a breath. "And I already told you, I'm not averse to trouble."

"Or flirting."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

Cooper started to laugh. "Yes. Pretty hard, too."

"Want me to stop?" *Say yes, because I'm not sure I can.*

"I didn't say that."

"Then I guess the real question is, are you scared of getting in a little trouble yourself?"

"If only you knew."

Now that was too easy a segue to ignore. "Which means what, exactly? You're a daredevil?"

He shook his head. "Hardly. I just recently found myself in a situation that—" Cooper stopped, narrowed his eyes, and pointed at me. "Oh no you don't. Name, please. I already have part of it."

"Do you now?"

“Your last name, Stone. That’s what the lady said, ‘Cappuccino for Stone.’”

So he’d been paying attention to his surroundings, which was good, or maybe he’d just been paying attention to me. My dick jerked between my legs. Apparently my body liked *that* idea a whole lot more.

“And how do you know that’s not my first name?”

Cooper ran his eyes down over me, and it might as well have been his hand with the way my body reacted. It hadn’t been *that* long since I’d gotten laid, and yet one look from Boy Scout and my body felt like a furnace.

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No.” Cooper shook his head as I took another long sip of my coffee. “It’s too succinct. Too cold. You need something…”

I settled back and propped my elbow on the arm of the chair, and Cooper’s gaze shifted to the silver bracelets at my wrist, the ring on my finger, then back to my face.

“I need something…?” I arched a brow.

“Hotter.” Cooper shrugged. “Sexier.”

Damn. Nothing shy about him right now, and I had to respect that he was asking for what he wanted. Something I was only too keen on giving.

I slipped my hand inside my jacket, pulled a business card and pen from the pocket, and wrote my main personal cell number on the back. Then I held it up between two fingers and dared him to take it.

As Cooper reached for it, I snatched it back and grinned.

He laughed. “Oh, so you’re a flirt *and* a tease.”

“What, you don’t like to be teased?”

Cooper plucked the card out of my hand. “I didn’t say that.” He glanced down at the number I’d written on one side and then flipped it over before licking his lips. “Lachlan Stone, CEO, Stone Security.” His eyes flicked up to mine. “Now that suits you.”

“Yeah? Sexy enough?”

“Oh yeah.” That blush made its way back into his cheeks, but to his credit, Cooper didn’t break our stare. “Lachlan.” The way he said it, rolling the Ls around his tongue like he could taste them, made me think he planned to use my name later. In the privacy of his apartment, naked and lying in bed—

Fuck. My cock ached at the thought as my bastard phone began to vibrate with the alarm I'd set for myself in case I got carried away. I had too much on my plate to be sitting here, eye-fucking Cooper, but I considered blowing it all off for another half-hour.

Unfortunately, that was when I remembered why the meeting was important enough to set the damn alarm in the first place—it was a personal favor to King.

Goddammit.

As I reached down to silence the alarm, I gave Cooper an apologetic smile. "Sorry to cut this short, but work calls."

His face fell for the briefest of heartbeats before he smoothed it out and waved a hand. "Yeah, of course."

As I stood and buttoned my suit jacket, I noticed him watching me and nodded at my card still in his hand. "You should give me a call, Cooper. See what trouble we can get into."

I gathered up my coat and shot him a wink, but left my drink on the table in case he wanted…a taste.

Let's see how brave the Boy Scout really is.

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6

COOPER

THE AMOUNT OF hours I'd spent mining information that never amounted to much was mind blowing. Being a journalist meant days and nights singularly focused on one story, hoping for a breadcrumb that could lead you to a bigger break.

So far my breadcrumbs had only led to a near-death experience and a whole lot of nothing else. Nothing I could use, anyway. I knew where a lot of the dealers congregated, which is how I'd ended up following some of them to an alley. I had photos of faces, had tracked down all I could find on them, had sussed out hidden drug spots, but I wasn't getting anywhere. I still had no idea who the ringleader was, and no one was freely giving their name.

The only actual evidence I had was the key card, or whatever it was that I'd found, which I'd hidden somewhere safe.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and reached for my coffee mug only to find it empty. Surviving on caffeine felt like a requisite of the job, and God knew I'd gone through enough that it'd probably replaced the blood in my veins at this point. Hell, when was the last time I ate something? It was already dark out, though that didn't mean much when the city was pitch black by five in the winter, but the clock on my phone said ten p.m.

Later than I thought. And what did I have to show for it?

Sighing, I went to close my laptop when an email notification popped up in the corner, and I clicked it open. When they deemed it too late to call with the time difference, my parents had resorted to sending emails to check

in, and I skimmed through it to make sure there was nothing urgent that needed my attention or response.

Are you ready to come home yet… Will you be coming back for your grandfather's 90th next month… Have you found a job… Are you being safe… Do you need any money?

I snorted at that, because they hadn't given me money since I was fifteen and started mowing lawns. Would things be tight down the road if I didn't get a job soon? Uh, yeah. But that would happen…at some point.

After writing back a response and promising to elaborate more later, I hit send and let my gaze wander out the lone window in my apartment. The view wasn't anything much, not with the fire escape blocking most of it, but it was enough to let in the moonlight. I hadn't bothered with curtains, being on the top floor, and I doubted anyone was interested enough to peer inside and watch me sit at a cramped desk most of the time. Although I'd considered getting some the last few days, because paranoia had made it feel like someone was following me. All. The. Time.

Are you being safe? If my family only knew just how unsafe I'd been, they'd have my ass on the next flight home.

Which was exactly why they didn't know the reason I was really here. It'd been only too easy to say I needed to get away from it all after losing Alex, that I needed time and space away from my hometown.

While I hadn't been lying about that, I hadn't given them the whole truth—the part about wanting to find the people responsible for his death and bring them to justice. But to do that, I needed to stay alive myself.

This headspace was not going to help me fall asleep anytime soon, no matter how tired I was. I needed to think about something more carefree, more positive, and when my eyes fell to the empty coffee mug sitting on my desk, the image of Lachlan Stone immediately came to mind.

Now there was a positive. One I'd never expected to find. But every time I needed to pull myself away from the dark side of this city, his sexy smile and obvious attraction to me was my new go-to.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so drawn to another person. It'd been almost instant—the chemistry, the ease, the comfort I felt with him. But it was even more than that. He'd made me forget *why* I was here in the first place, to just stop and enjoy the moment. Stop and enjoy him.

And boy had I.

From his coffee-colored eyes to his tousled brown hair and stubble shadowing his lips and strong jaw, he was difficult to sit across from and actually form coherent sentences with. But somehow I'd managed. I'd even flirted with him, which was insane. I wasn't the kind of guy who just ran into some random person at a coffee shop then sat down and eye-fucked him across a table, but I wasn't alone with that. He'd come on to me as well.

At least, I'd thought he did. I still couldn't believe it had happened, not really, and if it wasn't for the business card sitting by my laptop, I probably *wouldn't* have believed it.

A quick way to confirm it would be to give him a call, but something was holding me back. I wasn't sure if it was the circumstances of how we met, the fact I would feel guilty doing something fun when I knew the real reason I was here, or that maybe, just maybe, there was something niggling in the back of my mind about how Lachlan seemed a little too good to be true.

Maybe that was the cynical side of me. Or the paranoid one.

I reached for the card sitting on my desk and ran my thumb over his number, Lachlan's confident smile flashing through my mind as his gorgeous face appeared in vivid detail. My eyes drifted shut as I slumped back in my chair, imagining his wicked chuckle as he teased me about getting into trouble.

I shifted in my seat, propping my feet up on the small footrest beneath the desk, and allowed the dream to take over, to pull me in deeper to a place far away from my tiny-ass apartment. Back to the coffee shop where Lachlan sat across from me, his darkened eyes roaming over my body.

My fingers tightened on the small card I held connecting me to reality as I slipped further into my dream, and my head fell back against the headrest.

It felt like déjà vu, reaching for my coffee at the café's pick-up counter, only for the sinfully sexy man beside me to reach it first.

Only this time, he didn't pick it up but turned his attention on me instead.

Oh fuck. *The man was even more handsome up close. His eyes practically smoldered as he ran them over my face and down the length of my body, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.*

He moved, cornering me so my ass hit the counter, and I let him, too stunned by all that intensity focused on me.

He was just… Wow.

And then he licked his lips, drawing my attention to them, and said, "So, what do you say we get out of here?"

My pulse began to race with need as the mysterious man gave me a sensual smile. There was no way anyone said no to whoever he was, and the knowing look in his eyes told me he knew I wouldn't either.

I had to at least try to play the game.

"I don't even know your name," I said.

"Lachlan Stone," he replied in that smooth, deep voice. "And you're Cooper."

"How do you—"

"It's on your cup." He shifted his stance so his arm brushed up against mine. "Looks like we're not strangers anymore."

I heard the question again in what was left unsaid: do you want to get out of here?

Did I? Even though I knew nothing about him but his name?

Fuck yes I did.

I didn't even have to tell him to lead the way; he already knew I was ready and willing.

Leaving our coffees on the counter, he took my hand and led me out of the café, and a thrill raced through my body at doing something so spontaneous. Back home, many would even call it reckless, just going off with a strange man I barely knew. It wasn't like me at all, but that only added to the high as he steered us into an alley that felt…familiar. I couldn't place why, but I didn't have time to think on that, because Lachlan spun me around so that my back was up against the brick.

"Finally getting you right where I want you," he whispered as he pushed his leg in between mine.

I angled my head to the side as warm lips caressed the side of my neck. "Finally? We only just met."

"I've been watching you." His mouth moved up to nip at my jaw. "Waiting."

My eyes flew open. "You have?"

"Mhmm. For days. The way you fill out these jeans…" He lowered his hand to rub my cock, and I sucked back a moan.

Maybe I should've felt unnerved at his words, but all I could focus on was that he'd noticed me, and now his hands were on me. This breathtakingly gorgeous man saw and wanted me. *That wasn't alarming in the slightest—that was hot as hell.*

I slid my hands down to his tight ass and hauled him in even closer. He grinned against my neck before raising his head to look at me, and God, that stare. It was so all-consuming, made me want to do anything he asked, and I hoped he would.

A flick of his fingers and my jeans were unbuttoned. Then Lachlan took his time lowering my zipper, and my breathing became more rapid. Especially when he parted the material and reached inside to—

Something in my periphery moved, catching my attention, and I jerked my head to the left to see a tall, dark figure walking toward us from the depths of the alley. He was dressed fully in black, from his trench coat to his mask to his heavy boots, and I felt recognition spark when I looked at him.

Wait. *This alley…the masked vigilante… I'd been here before. I'd seen whoever he was do unspeakable things, and yet as he made his way closer, I didn't feel fear.*

I felt anticipation. Curiosity. Desire.

But none of that made sense. He needed to leave. There was no trouble here for him to handle. It was just me and a sexy stranger, who had his fingers wrapped around my dick—

I looked down at where I'd felt his hand, but it was gone. Lachlan *was gone, like he'd disappeared with the wind.*

What the…

Pushing off the wall, I turned my attention to the masked man moving closer and said, "What did you do?"

He cocked his head as he continued toward me, but didn't answer.

"Where did he go?" I asked. "What did you do with Lachlan?"

The second the words were out of my mouth, though, they felt unnecessary. Because my erection hadn't gone away when Lachlan disappeared. It was throbbing harder than ever.

I wanted to ask him what he wanted from me, but he moved with a purpose that told me without words. So I waited, willing him closer, and wondered what I'd find hidden beneath his layers. And then he reached for me—

I jerked awake suddenly. I was no longer in the alley but in my chair in my apartment.

And standing outside my window was the very masked man I'd been dreaming about.

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7

LACHLAN

THE WIND WHIPPED the tail ends of my trench coat around my ankles as I stood in the shadows at the bottom of the fire escape that zigzagged up the front side of Cooper's apartment.

This wasn't the first night I'd stood outside the old tenement building trying to convince myself not to climb the stairs to the top floor, where I knew Cooper would be sleeping. But usually my common sense would kick in and remind me of the miserable fate I would suffer if King found out what I was up to.

Something that was overridden tonight by the memory of blue eyes, pink cheeks, and a laugh that reminded me there was more in this world than the city I got lost in each night.

So instead of doing the smart thing, and getting the hell out of Dodge, I slipped deeper into the shadows, slid my mask in place, and flicked my hood up over my head.

Sure, I might be making dumb decisions lately, but at least I was cognizant enough to conceal my identity should anyone glance out their window.

I reached for the bottom rungs of the ladder and began to climb my way up the side of the old brick façade, my booted feet as silent and stealthy as the shadows I was slipping in and out of as I crept across the first landing and headed up the second, third, and fourth, and finally got to the fifth—Cooper's floor.

I curled my fingers around the rail as I pulled myself up onto the landing, then immediately moved to the edge of the building, flattening my back to the cool brick as I glanced inside expecting to find him in bed—

Fuck. I reared back.

Cooper was much closer than I'd anticipated, sitting by the exact window I was standing outside of, the faint glow of his computer screen illuminating where he'd fallen asleep at his desk.

Jesus Christ. What was it about this Boy Scout that had me making these reckless decisions? King was right—it wasn't like me to be so careless, to act without a plan. It was sloppy, and when you were sloppy you ended up getting caught—like I almost was now.

I cursed under my breath, annoyed at my lack of discipline and control. Then again, that was nothing new.

I needed to cut this shit out. I needed to get Cooper out of my head and get back to my regularly programed life. But that was easier said than done when my sole focus was on those expressive eyes of his rather than the drug dealers I'd saved his ass from.

But I couldn't deny it. In a matter of days Cooper had looked at me with fear, awe, desire, and humor—not that he knew the first two—and the idea that this would be the last time I saw him wasn't sitting right with me.

Oh fucking well. It wasn't like I could go knock on his door at this hour. Especially not dressed like this. And even if I could, what the hell did I think I would say?

So this was it. I just needed to cut the damn cord.

I shifted my feet and turned a fraction, wanting to get one last look at him before I disappeared. But when I looked inside the window expecting to find his eyes shut, they were open—and locked on me.

Cooper sucked in a breath and shoved his chair back from the desk, then sprang to his feet as shock rippled across every feature of his gorgeous face. He blinked several times as though trying to decide if I were real or not, then brought a hand to his chest—probably to make sure he wasn't having a heart attack.

I couldn't even begin to imagine what he was thinking, seeing me lurking outside his window in my full Libertine garb. After all, the last time we met he'd had a gun pointed at his head. I highly doubted he'd expected to look out his window and see the masked man from what was probably his worst nightmare.

I backed up, away from the window, fully intending to disappear over the rail and into the shadows, when Cooper held up his hand for me to… *stop*?

My feet froze as I tried to decipher if that was what he truly meant, and when he started toward the fire escape, I knew it was time to decide—stay or go?

If I were to leave now, there was no harm, no foul. I could chalk it up to a final look at the one I'd saved. But as Cooper drew closer to the window, I knew I wasn't going anywhere.

Something about him drew me. It had from the moment I saw him in that alley, to the small coffee shop, and now wasn't any different.

Leave. Leave right fucking now.

The words repeated on a loop in my head as Cooper reached the window, his chest heaving with every breath he took, and flicked open the locks.

What the hell did he think he was doing? I could've been anyone. Hell, as far as he knew I *was* anyone, a stranger from a dark alley who could inflict serious damage. Yet he shoved the window up, allowing me entry, and any thought I had of leaving disappeared along with my conscience.

"It's you…" Cooper's voice was whisper quiet on the breeze as his eyes roamed from my boots, up over my coat, to where my mask concealed my face. "How did you find me?"

By stalking your every move.

Too much? Probably. Yet it was the most logical assumption.

The glassy-eyed expression shining from those stunning eyes, however, told me logic was nowhere to be found right now—it was like he was in a daze.

I moved to the open window and slipped inside, and Cooper took a step back.

"Who are you?"

Questions were to be expected, just as my silence was. Not that he would make that correlation in his state, but that was the way it would go, especially after our face-to-face meeting at the coffee shop. I couldn't risk any kind of connection being made.

I ran my eyes over his white tank, grey hoodie and sweats, and the slippers warming his feet, and thought how cozy he looked. A total contrast

to my black boots, leather pants, and tactical Henley, which were all covered by my trench coat.

The apartment was as small as I'd suspected, and with my standing at the center of it, the square footage seemed to shrink with every breath I took. That didn't seem to worry Cooper, though. Whatever thoughts he'd had of me in that alley, whatever memory he had of that terrifying night, one thing was clear: I was not the source of his paranoia. I wasn't the reason he'd been looking over his shoulder these past few days.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice more demanding this time as I took another step his way. "I'm not scared of you."

I whipped my hand out and curled my fingers around the soft fabric of his tank, then lowered my face over his and growled, "Aren't you?"

Cooper angled his chin up, searching for any clues, but my position, the hood, and mask obstructed all views of my face, and the shadows helped to hide my eyes.

"No."

I couldn't help but smile at his bravado as I walked him back, his breathing coming even faster now as his back hit the wall.

Pesky small apartments.

"You should be."

"If you wanted to hurt me, you already would've."

So logic was finally starting to reassert itself. *Can't have that.*

"Says who?"

Quick as a flash, I hauled Cooper forward and he gasped. I spun him around and crowded him up against the flat surface, and this time I followed, aligning my body to his.

Fuck, this hadn't been the plan tonight.

I'd wanted to see him again, yes. But nowhere in that scenario could I have imagined pinning him to the wall—or getting hard. There was no use denying it. Not with the way my cock was trying to bust through my zipper.

Cooper trembled against me, from fear or desire, I couldn't be sure. But the response spurred something dark inside me, something savage.

"So trusting," I said, my voice low, my face so close to his cheek that my hood brushed up against it. "Such a Boy Scout."

"Scout…" He shifted against my hold, and when his ass grazed my hard dick, a soft moan escaped him.

Now *that* was definitely from desire.

“You called me that before.”

Yes, I had. But the fact he remembered was interesting. There’d been so much going on that night that part of me had wondered if he’d locked it all away, never to think of it again. But apparently not.

Had he dreamed about me? Was he dreaming right now?

I’d thought so when I first climbed in, but when he gripped my thigh, I could tell he was waking. His dream was becoming more lucid, the fire licking through his veins waking him up.

And that was my cue to leave.

I took a reluctant step away, and as I backed up to the window, Cooper turned. He didn’t follow me, didn’t make a move in my direction. Instead, he leaned back against the wall, his sweats barely able to contain his own erection, as he watched me through eyes dark with arousal.

This had gotten way out of hand. Not that *my* body was behaving itself either.

Knowing I needed to get out of there or risk doing something stupid, like crossing the room, stripping him naked, and revealing all my secrets, I turned toward the window and climbed out onto the fire escape.

“Wait.”

Don’t go back or you’ll never leave.

I turned my head to the side, but stayed right where I was.

“Will you”—he hesitated—“come back tomorrow?”

“I can’t.”

“Or you won’t?”

When I didn’t have an answer for that, he moved closer.

“I’ll leave the window open.”

So trusting. *Too* trusting. It made me want to turn around and show him why he shouldn’t be.

Instead, I disappeared back into the shadows.

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8

COOPER

THE TWENTY-FOUR hours following my surprising late night visit were torture.

I hadn't gotten shit done all day, not with the man in the mask stealing every bit of my headspace. He was all I could think about, wondering who he was, why he'd tracked me down, what he wanted from me. Or if I'd somehow made the whole thing up and it was just another part of my dream.

But that couldn't be true, because surely I would've ended it in a much more satisfying way than his crawling back out my window.

And then I went and said he should *come back tonight*? That I'd *leave the window open*? I needed to have my head thoroughly examined, because that was insane. Inviting a stranger, someone I'd seen do serious bodily harm to others, into my private space.

He wouldn't come, though. I didn't know what prompted the visit, or how he'd found out where I lived, or what he wanted, but I'd felt his resolve as he was leaving, like it had been a mistake to see me.

Why, then, did my fucked-up brain think that made this situation even hotter somehow? Was it just the mystery of it all? The fact that he showed restraint with me when it was obvious he could overpower me in a matter of seconds if he wanted to?

Or was I just *really* hard up after the last few months?

All of the above, I thought as I paced my room and checked the time on my phone. It was late, but maybe not sneaking-up-the-fire-escape late in his

eyes. I hadn’t specified a time, and he probably wouldn’t come at all anyway.

But what if he did? What if he was outside watching me pace back and forth like I was counting down the minutes?

God, that was so lame.

I scrubbed a hand over my face and forced myself to sit the hell down and at least look busy. Like I wasn’t *expecting* anything to happen. Like I actually had a life.

I opened my laptop and stared at the screen for a long moment before shutting it.

No, maybe I shouldn’t be working but doing something more casual, like…reading a book in bed, or watching a movie in bed. Something *in bed* to entice him to join me.

Because that was what it all came down to—I’d been thinking about this masked stranger since the first time I’d seen him. Hell, I’d been dreaming about him. And all that sexual tension, pushing me up against the wall last night, calling me a Boy Scout in that deep, throaty voice…

A shiver rolled through me, and I stood up and went to check that I still had supplies nearby, just in case things went the way my cock wanted them to. When I was satisfied they were hidden but within reaching distance, I forced myself to lie down and try to relax, which was easier said than done. I hadn’t bothered getting a TV for the place yet, not just because there was barely space for one, but because I spent most of my waking moments trying to do something productive.

But right this moment, I would’ve gladly turned on something mindless. In fact…

I pulled out my tablet, looked for something action packed to hold my attention, and hit play.

Relax, I told myself as I drew in a deep breath and settled back on the mattress. *Try not to think about him or all of the what-ifs.*

Not the easiest feat when my eyes kept darting to the window.

I couldn’t say how long I lay there. Ten minutes, twenty? But with the show playing on the screen, my eyes began to feel heavy. Maybe I could close them, just for a few minutes. That would make the time pass by. Right?

I turned off the show and put the tablet beside me, not wanting to be woken by a broken nose. Then I scooted down the bed and got comfortable,

making sure I had a good visual of the window, should my mystery man make an appearance.

It didn't take long for sleep to find me, all the overthinking tiring out my brain to where the darkness pulled me in. Peace claimed me, warmth enveloped me, until I felt it surrounding me on all sides, wrapping me in its embrace like a strong pair of—

My eyes flew open as the delicious weight and warmth registered in my brain as exactly what it was—my vigilante.

The one I'd been waiting for all night, here in my room at the end of my bed, his knees flanking my legs, caging me in place. My heart skipped several beats as I stared up at him, and I knew I *should* be terrified, or at least a little scared, but the only emotion coursing through me as I stared up at my masked man was…excitement.

No, that was a lie. I felt excited and turned on.

He'd come to me. Come for me. And now all I wanted was for him to come *with* me.

Was that fucked up? Yes. But as he cocked his head, I shifted under him and arched my hips in invitation, like some horny slut boy.

What the hell was the matter with me? I didn't know this guy. I didn't even know what he looked like. I was acting completely out of character.

With the light behind him I couldn't see his eyes as he shifted up to straddle my thighs, but somehow I knew he was watching me—I could feel his gaze as it burned a path down my body. So I stretched my arms up over my head and let him get a full look at me.

In the same sweats and tank as last night, there was no concealing the hard-on he'd inspired—hell, I'd had it all day. But as I lay there pinned to my mattress, the ache intensified.

Should I say something? Probably. But I didn't want to scare him away.

Okay, that was just ridiculous. Like *I* could scare *him.* But something told me one wrong move and he'd vanish before I could stop him. So like some kind of supplicant I lay beneath him, waiting for whatever it was he wanted to do.

I'd *really* gone off the deep end. But something about this man, this stranger, had me reaching for and embracing the dark place I'd met him in. As if I could step into the night and go a little mad.

Staring down at me, he brought his gloved hand to the edge of my tank and slipped it under the fabric. The cool touch of the leather against my

heated skin had me sucking in a breath.

He paused, but when I didn't say or do anything to stop him, he continued to push the material up my body until he reached the base of my neck. Then he twisted it in his fist and hauled me up so our faces were only inches apart, but even this close the shadows hid every part of him that would give a key to his identity.

My breathing intensified as he whipped the bottom of my tank over my head and behind my neck, fully exposing my upper body, but when I reached for him, he reared back and shook his head.

"You touch me, this ends."

It didn't surprise me in the least that he was dominant, wanting full control while I took whatever *he* wanted to give. Wasn't that exactly why I'd left my window open? Because I wanted that too.

Somehow my fantasies had nothing on the reality, though, and I nodded and dropped my hands. "Okay. No touching."

I could practically hear the smirk in his voice as he said, "Good, Scout."

There it was again. That nickname. I wanted to ask him why he called me that, but now wasn't the time for questions. Not when he curled his gloved fingers beneath the waistband of my sweatpants and drew them down, leaving me exposed. Every inch of his skin was covered, making him even more of a mystery than ever—and didn't *that* have my cock rising to full mast.

He sat back on his heels, and I could feel the weight of his gaze on me, his slow perusal with only the moonlight as his guide.

I thrust my hips up, feeling restless for what was coming, and said, "Put your hands on me." The way I sounded so eager and almost breathless was downright embarrassing.

In a flash, he flipped me onto my stomach, and then his body was on mine, hard and heavy as he pressed me into the mattress.

"I'm going to put a whole lot more than my *hands* on you."

A shiver rolled through me, physical proof I wasn't dreaming. I wasn't able to see him now, or touch him, but he was going to have his way with me, and I'd never been more amped for anything in my life.

Who the fuck *am I?*

Someone who was asking for it, that was who.

"Make me feel you tomorrow…"

He went still at my words, words I thought I'd kept in my brain.

"You're not the one calling the shots here, Scout." He traced the side of my naked body with his gloved hand before grabbing my ass and giving me an almost-painful squeeze. "I'm going to make you feel me for a *week*."

Air hit my back as he moved off me, and then he tugged my sweatpants completely off.

I was tempted to turn around, dying to see if he would take off his clothes and what any part of him looked like, but the last thing I wanted was for this to end. Something that was clear as day when he tossed one of his gloves on my pillow.

"Don't even think about moving—"

"Or this ends." I licked my lips. "I won't."

A hard smack from his bare hand across my ass made me gasp, but I hadn't expected anything less. In fact, I canted my ass up higher.

A low chuckle, still muffled by his mask, met my ears as he drew a finger down between my cheeks.

"That's what makes you a good little Scout. You're a rule follower." Something shifted, and when he spoke again, his voice was clearer and husky. "Now let's see if you taste as good as I've imagined."

And then he spread my cheeks and lowered his mouth onto me.

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9

LACHLAN

I HADN'T BEEN planning to come back here tonight.

I'd spent the entire day convincing myself of that fact. The risk was too much to even contemplate for a chance to see Cooper again. Or, if I were being honest with myself, to touch him.

But as the day turned to night, I'd found my resolve slipping. The night clouded the common sense that came with the light of day, which was how I found myself pushing my mask up out of my way and risking everything. But there was one thing I was banking on:

"That's what makes you a good little Scout. You're a rule follower."

Cooper's submissive nature.

If he'd been more demanding, more assertive, this would never work. It would be a done deal. I never would've shown my face—my *self*—again. But he was willing to go along with this masked-man fantasy he'd created for himself, the one I was more than happy to seduce him with, and for that reason I knew he wouldn't risk ending it here when he was so clearly begging for more.

I ran my hand over the round curve of his ass and took a handful of his plump cheek. Then I lowered my head and took a deep inhale.

Mmm… The fresh scent of soap clung to his body, letting me know he'd eagerly been awaiting my return tonight for this exact reason, and nothing save a natural fucking disaster was going to stop me from getting the one thing I wanted more than ever.

"Now let's see if you taste as good as I've imagined."

I gripped his other cheek in my gloved hand and spread him wide, and when I flicked my tongue over his tight little hole he flinched. I dug my fingers into his supple skin and held him in place as I licked a wet path up his shadowy channel.

A muffled curse left him as Cooper tried to push back onto me, and I nipped at his soft skin, reminding him without words exactly who was in charge here.

"God, that feels…"

I didn't catch how it felt as I buried my face deeper, my mind shutting down everything but the warmth of his body, the musky, earthy taste on my tongue as I teased his hole.

But this wasn't the time for a long, drawn-out fuck. This was about need, want, desire. It was about satisfying the ache that had started somewhere back in that alley. About the draw we'd felt since, to be with one another even if we had no idea who the other person was.

I wanted to equal parts consume and erase him.

I needed to free myself from him but wanted to drown in him first.

A soft moan from above had me raising my head a fraction to check Cooper was keeping up his end of the deal, and true to his word, his face was buried in his pillow. His arms were wrapped around it as he bucked back toward me, the need to feel something inside of him as obvious as the desperation I felt to *put* something inside him.

I rubbed the stubble on my jaw along the sensitive skin of his ass cheek, and a tremble racked his body.

"Fuck," he panted. "Do that again."

I grinned as I gave him what he asked for before massaging my thumb over his hole and spitting on the small pucker to get it nice and slick. Then I gently pushed inside, my thumb the first part of me to experience his tight, hot heat.

Cooper immediately pushed back at the penetration, and I dragged my thumb free, added more moisture, and came back at him with my index and middle finger, scissoring them apart, stretching him nice and wide.

I'd imagined the way he'd moan under me, but nothing could compare to the breathy sounds coming out of him, or the way his tight ass swallowed my fingers so greedily.

Desperate for another taste, I tongued and teased him, eliciting more of those sounds I knew would haunt me when I left.

“More.” Cooper shoved back on me, and that made my cock so hard I was surprised it didn’t burst through the leather.

I lifted my head and nipped at the round globe of his ass, making him remember his place. But I was ready for more, and I drew my fingers out of him to undo my pants.

When he heard my zipper, he gestured to the side of his bed without turning around. “I have—”

“I got it.” Like I wouldn’t come prepared to fuck.

After tearing the packet open with my teeth, I pushed my pants down under my ass and rolled the condom on. Cooper was patient underneath me while I lubed up, which was more than I could say for myself. It was all I could do not to get naked and rub myself all over every inch of his smooth skin. He was mouthwatering like this, the intoxicating scent of him filling my lungs and the heady taste of him on my tongue.

But there was no way I could reveal more of myself than I already had. This was already a mistake in the making, but it was too late to stop now. I had to have him. I had to shove myself so deep inside him that he’d feel me next week, like I’d promised.

And I wasn’t a man who broke my promises.

I teased his hole with the head of my dick, nudging against him until I breached his entrance. The heat of him enveloped me instantly, and I closed my eyes, relishing the feel as I rocked inside him inch by inch.

Fuck. Me.

I didn’t move, didn’t even breathe as I took a second to get myself under control. What the hell was it about Cooper that had me on the edge already?

His hands flexed on the pillow, and I ignored the way I wished they were on me instead and began to move, drawing out of him and not being gentle in the slightest as I thrust back inside, watching him clench the pillow again.

With my gloved hand on his lower back to hold him right where I wanted him, I began to ride him hard, imprinting myself on him with every drive.

Cooper buried his face in the pillow, using it to muffle the lustful groans escaping him at every forceful thrust I gave. His bed was pushed up against the wall, which was fortunate considering the way I was hammering into

him. Otherwise the frame would've been scraping the floor, pissing off any neighbors that might be below.

But I didn't care about any of that. All I cared about was the way Cooper's body was clinging to mine like it was a fucking vise. His ass gripped my shaft in a stranglehold that was seconds away from making me come like some hard-up teenager.

I must've been riding high off some kind of savior complex I was experiencing. Some sort of power trip.

But that didn't seem right. Even sitting across the table from him, sipping coffee, the chemistry had been undeniable. We'd been one ill-timed phone call away from doing what we were doing right here in some alley or restroom.

So maybe it was just him. Those blue eyes, that quick-to-smile mouth, that trusting nature that I was now using and abusing as I drilled deeper inside his body.

There was no coming back from this lie I was perpetuating. No meeting with him as Lachlan, no getting to know him as most "normal" people would with someone they were interested in.

I would forever be the masked stranger—the way it had to be.

Cooper shifted under me, pushing his hips back, and I realized my pace had slowed, my mind overtaking my body until his sexy ass swallowed me deep.

"Christ." I gripped his hips with both hands as I drew out of him and then slammed back home.

Cooper gasped, his arms giving out as he fell flat on the mattress again, and this time I followed him down, my dick lodged tight. I grabbed hold of his hands and pried each finger from the pillow, then stretched his arms up over his head and started to move.

"Is this what you wanted?" When he nodded and tried to turn his head, I growled, "Don't you even think about turning that pretty head of yours."

Cooper grunted as I tightened my hands around his wrists.

"Not if you want to come while my dick's in you."

"Please." He whimpered and rocked his hips, and I knew without looking he was rubbing himself off against the covers.

"You beg so nicely," I whispered by his ear. "Do it again, but louder."

"*Please…*" he said, louder but still slightly muffled by the pillow.

I dug my nails into his wrists and began to rut against him harder, over and over, until his body bucked up and I was drilling him into the mattress. “Louder.”

Cooper’s body tensed, knocking my cock up against his sweet spot, and when he jerked his head up and screamed, “Fucking *please*,” I began to thrust harder until he went out of his mind.

He wasn’t the only one. Those desperate pleas did something to me, had me fighting back the explosion that threatened as my balls drew up tight.

But I wasn’t about to come before I made Cooper scream out his pleasure.

With my gloved hand holding tight to his wrists, I used the other to thread my fingers through his hair, pull his head back, and suck the tender skin beneath his ear.

“Remember who made you feel this fucking good,” I growled. He was trying so hard not to come, obeying so well that even I couldn’t hold back anymore. “Come for me. Let me hear you.”

I’d barely gotten the words out when he tensed, and then he cried out so loud I knew it’d be etched in my memory forever.

Fuck, I couldn’t hold off anymore. My orgasm roared down my spine with a vengeance, and I dropped my head against his back as the force of it hit.

It was blinding, and I held on tight to his wrists while I ran the hand I had tangled in his hair down to grip the back of his neck. I came so long and hard I was panting, struggling for breath as my hips slowed and my vision came back.

Jesus Christ, what the *fuck* was that?

“Oh my God.” Cooper went lax, his words coming out slurred, and I couldn’t help my feral smile. I was a permanent mark in his brain now, and it fed my already huge ego to know he wouldn’t be forgetting me anytime soon.

With my cock still deep inside him, the last thing I wanted to do was move, but when he started to lift his head, I knew I had a matter of moments before his curiosity became too great.

I let go of his wrists, but kept my grip on his neck, forcing him back down. Then I leaned in by his ear, nipped his lobe with my teeth, and said, “Don’t move until I’m gone.”

“I won’t.”

I sat up, lowered my mask over my face, and pulled the hood back up in case he got curious.

I pulled out of him slowly, tied off the condom, and thought twice about leaving it in his trash. The last thing I needed was his using anything to trace my identity.

Getting to my feet, I zipped up and took a long look at Cooper splayed out on the mattress. The sheen of sweat on his back was so fucking enticing, and so were the shades of pink that marred his skin from our rough encounter.

It was a shame to only enjoy him once, but this was already more than I deserved.

“You should come back,” Cooper said, not moving a muscle. “Anytime.”

“And you should lock your window. *All* the time.”

“Probably.” He yawned, and I could see that his eyes were already closed, like he was halfway deep into sleep. “You can show yourself out.”

I smirked and shook my head, then headed back to the window to exit the way I’d entered.

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10

LACHLAN

THE ELEVATOR OPENED and I stepped out onto the second floor at Libertine, which contained our members-only fine-dining establishment, along with my current destination—Elixir.

There were more members than I'd expected for the late hour, but we all had something we needed to escape, didn't we? Like bad decisions. Or the temptation to turn around and repeat them, consequences be damned.

I headed straight for the bar, needing something strong to take the edge off. Despite coming like a fucking geyser inside of Cooper's tight ass, I was still riding the high of adrenaline, and this was the safest outlet for me right now. The alternative was roaming the streets looking for trouble, and I was already caught up in an untenable situation. I didn't need to add more to my plate.

The bartender looked up, saw me coming, and held up a finger to those he was serving to rush over to me.

"A double whiskey on the rocks," I said. In a matter of seconds, the glass was in my hands, and I took a long, much-needed swallow.

"Drinking at the bar alone? What trouble have you been enjoying?" Alessio smirked as he slid in beside me, and the bartender was already back and ready for his order. "A Negroni, thanks."

"A man can't drink in peace anymore."

"He can. If he's got something to hide." Alessio frowned as he studied my face. "Where've you been?"

"None of your business."

“Really?” He leaned in to sniff me, and I shoved him away.

“What the fuck?”

“You smell like sex. Did you just come from the fifth floor?”

It would’ve been easier to just say yes, that a visit to the more salacious parts of the Libertine club was where I’d chosen to get off, but I wouldn’t put it past Alessio to check the security feeds later just to see who was coming and going.

And the last thing I needed was his ass sniffing around.

“No.”

“No. That’s it?”

I side-eyed him. “That’s it.”

Alessio took a sip of his drink, and just when I thought he’d let it go, he narrowed his eyes. “You’re full of shit.”

“And you’re *annoying* as shit. Jesus, I just want to enjoy my fucking drink. Is that too much to ask?”

“No, but you look like you’d rather drown yourself in it than actually consume it.” Alessio shrugged. “In my experience that means one of two things. You regret what you did, or you don’t and know you can’t have it again.”

Fucking Alessio. If he wasn’t such a good friend, I might’ve knocked him out just to shut him up. But the truth was, if anyone knew about regret, it was him. And in this very moment I definitely fell into the second category, and *that* was pissing me off.

“Ah, I see, you want what you can’t have.” He gestured to the bartender, his eyes never leaving mine. “Sucks, doesn’t it?”

I grunted and downed the contents of my glass in one long swallow just as the bartender arrived.

“He’ll take another,” Alessio said, and as the bartender made what was no doubt to be the second of *many* drinks I was about to consume, Alessio leaned into the counter and ran his eyes down over me.

“Would you stop looking at me? It’s creepy.”

“I’m looking for clues.”

“This isn’t a How to Host a Murder Mystery party.”

“Are you sure? Last time we chatted, there were a few bodies left in your wake.”

I narrowed my eyes on the sarcastic prick. “Don’t you have some computer to hack? Some government to infiltrate? I thought you only

ventured above ground once a month."

"This *is* that one time. I was coming to stock up on some gin but when I saw you, I thought—"

"'Why not go and annoy the shit out of my friend?'"

"—I haven't seen Lachlan for a few days, wonder what he's been up to. Especially after he took a vested interest in a certain…Cooper Patterson."

My spine stiffened—not to mention something else below my belt.

"You know, for someone as stealthy as you generally are, those stiff shoulders are a dead giveaway, friend."

"Fuck you."

"Thanks, but I don't like playing second fiddle."

I rolled my eyes as I reached for my refreshed drink and took a sip. "You don't play any fiddle these days."

"It's a choice."

"It's a punishment, but whatever floats your boat. Unlike you, I'm not a nosy bastard."

"Whatever. It's my job to gather information."

"When it's needed."

"This *is* needed. You're playing with fire for this guy, and if King finds out…"

He didn't need to say what would happen. I was already walking a thin line with King, and if he found out I'd been following Cooper, that I'd just spent the night inside him? Let's just say I liked being alive.

"I know. All right? You don't need to keep harping on it."

"Apparently I do," Alessio said. "Did this guy weave some kind of spell over you that night in the alley? You've been a man obsessed."

He didn't know the half of it.

"Was tonight the first night you've seen him?"

Not wanting to compound my fuck-ups by lying to my friend more than I needed to, I decided to skirt the truth instead.

"It was the first night I fucked him."

Alessio opened his mouth like he was going to say something but then clicked it shut. "But not the first night you've *seen* him?"

I raised a brow, and he stared at me for a long moment before calling down the bar, "We need shots, and keep 'em coming." Then he picked up his glass and gestured for me to follow him to a private U-shaped booth in the back corner.

He didn’t wait for me to fully slide in the booth before saying, “Tell me everything. And don’t even think about leaving out why you’re wearing your leathers instead of a suit.”

“Christ, you’re—”

“Perceptive? Yeah. I am.” He nodded at the bartender setting a couple rounds of shots in front of us.

“He doesn’t know it was me.”

“Clarify.”

I reached into the inner pocket of my coat and set the mask on the table between us.

“Are you fucking insane?”

“Yeah.” I tossed back a shot, relishing the burn. “I think I am.”

Leaning in, he lowered his voice even though there was no one around our booth to hear us. “You fucked him in your *mask*?”

The whiskey was making its way through my system, warming my insides and taking the edge off. Unfortunately, that also meant my lips were looser than usual.

I nodded. “I did.”

“And Cooper…wanted you to?”

“Christ, Alessio, you think I’m some kind of predator? He invited me in.”

“Oh. The guy’s got some hero worship goin’ on.”

“Don’t fucking call me that.”

“It’s true, though.” He dangled a shot from his fingers, a knowing smile on his lips. “You saved his life and he decides to thank you with his body.”

“That’s not—” I stopped, let that thought roll around my brain. I would’ve known a thank-you fuck. “It wasn’t like that. He would’ve fucked me as Lachlan too.”

Alessio choked on his drink and coughed. “What?”

“You really underestimate me, don’t you?

“No. No, no, no.” He shook his head and pointed at me with his shot glass. “You did *not* introduce yourself to that guy. You didn’t. And how do I know that? Because you’re a smart asshole and you’d know better than to let this shit get messier than it is.”

“I’m aware. You don’t think I’ve told myself the same thing over and over again? I don’t know what it is about this guy. Maybe the fact he seems so…out of place here?”

“And you thought you’d, what? Break him in to the seedier side of New York?”

“Gee, thanks, fucker.”

“You’re the one acting like a stalker.”

“Whatever.” I downed another shot and slumped back in my seat. “It’s over now. Tonight was it.”

“Yes, because if you weren’t jonesing for the guy before you had your dick in him, you definitely won’t be now.”

“Remind me again why we’re friends.”

“I know all your secrets?”

He did now.

“Right?” Alessio said. “This *is* the only thing you’re keeping from me? Because I can’t help you if I don’t know.”

“Because you were such a help the other night?”

He picked up one of the last two shots and slid the other to me. “You and I both know the only person who comes before us is—”

“King.”

“Right. So stop busting my balls over that and drink your fucking shot.”

We both downed the fiery liquid in one gulp, slamming the glasses onto the table.

“And one last thing,” Alessio added. “If you plan to start stalking your little misfit—”

“Boy Scout.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

“Make sure you check in with me. Last thing I need is for you to wind up dead on my watch.”

“Such a *good* friend.” I snorted, ran a hand through my hair, and froze.

Oh fuck. Fuck…

I shoved my hand in my pocket for my gloves, and that was when I realized I’d left one of the damn things at Cooper’s. When I entered the club, my head had been so jumbled that I didn’t even realize I’d only taken one off.

Goddamn it.

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11

COOPER

THE DOOR TO the deli flew open, and Hannah rushed inside, her tangle of long black hair sweeping around her from the wind. She brushed it back from her face as she scanned the small restaurant and gave me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." She leaned down to greet me with an air kiss, then tossed her shopping bags onto an empty chair before taking the one opposite me. "My boss decided she didn't want the Stuart Weitzman boots, she wanted the Bottega Venetas, so I had to haul ass to their boutique, which is all the way on the Upper East Side, and *then* on the way back some dickhead decided it would be fun to hold the doors on the five train, which meant security had to get involved, and it was a whole thing." She paused and took a sip of the water I'd gotten for her then let out a heavy breath. "Anyway, sorry I'm late."

I chuckled at her frazzled state. "It's fine. I know how bosses can be."

"You're not kidding. I mean, I'm grateful for the job, I just thought being executive assistant to a stylist meant I'd be sitting in on all the fashion, not fetching it."

"One of these days," I assured her with a wink, as the waiter came by to take our orders.

"So, speaking of jobs," she said once we'd placed our pastrami on rye orders, "what's the sitch with yours? You find one yet?"

I shook my head. "Can't say I've been successful in that department."

Hannah rested her chin on her hands, and as she looked at me with those doe eyes, it took me back to our college days, when we'd gossip over lunch or between classes. Sometimes it felt like a lifetime since then—others like no time had passed at all.

Today was definitely more the latter.

"If you get desperate, I heard boss lady say they're looking for someone to take over the social media content. I can put in a good word for you." She wrinkled her nose when she glanced down at the Colorado Rockies sweater I wore. "Not that I think you'd enjoy posting about clothes all day."

"No? You trying to say I'm not a great choice for some fashion job?"

"Like I said, call me when you're desperate."

I chuckled and took a long sip of my soda. It felt nice to actually be face to face with someone familiar, especially considering I didn't know anyone else in the city. Hannah had moved here years ago, but we'd kept in touch, and she helped me find a place.

She'd also introduced me to the coffee shop I frequented, since it was near her job, and I wondered if that meant Lachlan worked nearby too.

Though it felt wrong for me to even think about him right now, not when I'd been entertaining someone altogether different in my thoughts.

But I wasn't going to think about either of them. The last thing I needed to do was have a hard-on for lunch.

"I'll find something," I said, picking at the lint on my sleeve. "I'm not worried."

"Oh? Fall into some money I don't know about?"

"Nah, just…" I wasn't sure how much she needed to know, but fuck, I had to tell someone. Otherwise I might damn well lose my mind. "There's been a lot going on."

"How's that? You don't know enough people in the city for a lot to be going on. No offense."

"No, you're right. I…" I ran a hand over my jaw as I blew out a breath. "I need to tell you something, but I swear to God if you judge me or tell anyone else—"

"Won't say a word," she said, crossing her heart. "Tell me all the things, mister. Is it juicy? It sounds juicy."

"You might say that."

She squealed and clapped her hands as our sandwiches were delivered, but gestured for me to go on.

Shit, was I really going to do this? Spill my guts about what I'd been up to? I trusted Hannah with my life, and she'd always kept my secrets. But I didn't want to put her in danger. Maybe I could just skirt around the part where I'd had a gun pointed at my face—since we were eating and all.

I dug into the pocket of my coat and pulled out a certain masked stranger's glove—the only evidence I had that he existed outside of the fantasies I'd had of him in the past few days. I tossed it on the table between us.

Hannah looked down at the black leather glove then back up to me. "Uh, what exactly am I looking at here?"

I picked up my sandwich. "A version of Cinderella's slipper."

"Cinderella's— Wait, you met someone? Where?" She let out a huff and slumped back in her seat. "You've only been here a few weeks."

Not about to tell her I'd met him in a grungy alley where he'd saved me from having my head blown off, I instead went with a half-truth.

"Well, that's the thing—we haven't technically 'met.'"

"I'm confused. If you haven't met, how do you have his glove? Oh my *God*, were you watching some hot guy who happened to drop his glove? That's so…*Serendipity* of you."

"Actually, it's more like a superhero film."

She snorted. "Oh, I'm sorry, was that a little too romcom for you?"

"No." I pointed to the glove. "The guy didn't only wear gloves, but a mask too. So he definitely fits my superhero vibe more than your romcom."

"A mask?" Hannah dropped her half-eaten sandwich onto the plate and leaned across the table. "What do you mean he was wearing a mask? Did you go to some kinky sex party without me?"

"Not exactly. But I did have some kinky sex."

"Shut the hell up."

"Okay, but then you won't get all those juicy details you were asking about."

Hannah pursed her lips, running her eyes over me, then her mouth curved into a devilish grin. "Well, we can't have that, can we? Spill."

Okay, where to start? Where to start…

She didn't know about the drug dealer situation, so it wasn't like I could tell her my hero had followed me home after I botched a deal and snuck in

my window. So how did I fudge that little detail?

"I was at home one night, researching my story, when I glanced out the window and…"

"And…?"

"Remember you said you wouldn't judge me." She nodded, and I continued, "And I saw someone watching me."

There. That wasn't a complete lie.

She swallowed her bite, and then cleared her throat. "Someone was *watching* you?"

"Mhmm."

"Like a…stalker?"

I'd never thought of him that way. But she didn't know the other part of the story, so of course it sounded like he was a stalker.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Then what would you say?"

"Hot, masked stranger?"

"That you don't know."

"Right."

"So let me get this straight in my head. One night, you were sitting at your desk working and you looked out the window, saw some masked guy on your fire escape watching you, and decided, *he looks like someone I want to sleep with*?"

"I did mention he was hot, right?"

"He was wearing a mask—how could you tell?"

Did she have to be thinking *so* logically? Logic had no room in this conversation. "Hey, you said you wouldn't judge."

"That was before I knew you were risking your life for sex."

"*Kinky* sex," I corrected her.

"You're crazy. You know that, right?"

"Probably. But it's not like we just jumped straight into bed. The first night I saw him, he was going to run but I stopped him. I was so…intrigued that I invited him in." I shrugged. "So I guess I was the one who made a move."

"On a stalker?"

"How about we rename him as the sexy masked man?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I don't know. What if he turns out to be some lunatic?"

He could, I guess. It wasn't like I hadn't thought it once or twice myself. But I knew something Hannah didn't—he'd *saved* me. So why would he do that if he was just going to turn around and hurt me later?

"I don't think that's going to happen—like I said, I invited him in. Plus, if he was going to hurt me, don't you think he would've done that when I was pinned to the bed under him?"

She gasped. "*Cooper*. You didn't…"

"I told you, hot, kinky sex. And tell me, how is it any different from hooking up after swiping right?"

"Because he didn't find you online," she said. "He found you by peering through your *window*."

I chuckled and nodded. "I know, and call me crazy, but I found it… sexy."

"You're crazy."

Yes, I was. But I also wasn't lying. Seeing my hot vigilante standing out on my fire escape after dreaming about him had been one of the most surreal moments of my life. Also one of the hottest, and crazy or not, I was happy I'd had the courage to ask him to come back, because *wow*, what a night that had been.

"So, you had hot sex with some stranger in a mask and now all that remains—because your dignity left this deli when you admitted to all of this—is his glove?"

"So much for being supportive and nonjudgmental."

"I can judge you and still be supportive. I just don't want you to wind up in some alley no longer breathing."

I grimaced. That comment was a little too close for comfort, but not in the way she thought.

"Hey, I'm sorry." Hannah reached over and squeezed my hand. "I didn't mean that to sound so harsh."

"I know—"

"It's just, I worry about you, and your parents would kill me if anything happened to their baby."

She was right, of course. My parents were already worried about my moving to the big city. If anything were to happen to me, it would crush them.

I was such an idiot. I should've just told Hannah about Lachlan, the safe coffee shop guy I'd connected with. Why had I decided to confess this

dangerous little story?

Because you wanted to see if you were crazy for having done it in the first place—and shocker, moron, you were.

"Look, I'm okay. It was one moment of madness." *Unfortunately*. But after days staring at my open window, I'd finally given up on his ever coming back. "We'll chalk it up to the one risky thing I've ever done in my life. Hell, if it wasn't for that"—I pointed to the glove—"I might think I'd hallucinated the whole thing."

"Are you sure you didn't?"

I shook my head. "My body definitely went through *something* that night, so no, I don't think so."

Hannah picked up the glove and examined it. "You don't think your hero will come back for this?"

I shrugged. "Maybe if it'd been his mask. But no, I think that will be the last I see of him."

"Maybe that's for the best." She handed the glove back to me, and I stuffed it into my pocket, nodding my agreement.

"Maybe."

As if she could sense my disappointment, she picked up the other half of her sandwich and said, "But that *is* a very juicy story."

I grinned. "Told you."

AN HOUR OR so later, we parted ways at the deli, Hannah rushing back to work while I did a little window-shopping before heading home. It'd been great to catch up with her, even though she probably thought I needed therapy now.

Oh well, it wasn't like she hadn't told me some crazy shit back in college. I guess it was just odd for her that the shoe was on the other foot. I'd always been so conscientious, so studious back in the day, and while that hadn't changed all that much, I wasn't usually the kind of guy to open my window to masked strangers and invite them in for sex.

I stopped outside of my apartment building, stared up the fire escape that zigzagged its way up the front, and wondered why my vigilante hadn't returned.

Had I done something wrong that night? I'd done everything he asked of me. Made sure not to look at him. But still he hadn't come back.

Maybe one night was all he wanted. Or maybe he didn't enjoy himself?

No. That wasn’t true. I *knew* he’d enjoyed himself. I’d felt his body tense inside mine, heard his sexy roar of satisfaction, so that definitely wasn’t the reason. Maybe he was already taken, which was why he didn’t want me looking for him? Or *at* him?

I had no idea, but as I trudged up the stairs to my floor, I couldn’t help feeling upset about it all. I wanted to see him again. I wanted to know who he was. But knowing that would never likely happen had turned my mood to shit.

When I reached the door to my apartment, I was shocked to see it slightly ajar, and my disappointment turned to annoyance. If Ms. Edith was in there doing a spot check, I just might lose my fucking cool. I was a good tenant, damn it, and I didn’t need her treating me like I was some kind of degenerate.

But as I pushed open the door to my apartment, my feet froze.

My place had been tossed.

Every single thing I owned had been turned upside down. Bedding was on the floor; the tiny kitchen was in shambles. Drawers were pulled out and turned over, utensils all over the ground. The fridge door was left wide, and my desk was a complete mess.

My heart hammered as I stared at the destruction in front of me, and suddenly I had a flash of the man I’d spent all of lunch talking about. A vision of him in his trench coat, mask, and gloves, crouched on my fire escape.

Did he *do this?*

I didn’t think so. He’d had plenty of opportunities to hurt me or take things while I wasn’t looking, and never had. So why would he come back here and trash the place?

My mind started to race, but nothing made any sense until my eyes landed on my backpack across the room and—

Shit.

I raced over to it and unzipped it, locating the back of the logo that I’d carefully plucked the threads from, slipped the key card I’d found the other night inside of, and sewn back into place. It was still there.

I let out a sigh of relief. *Thank God.* And just as I was about to call the police, I paused.

If I called the cops, they were going to ask questions. Questions I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer. Questions I wasn’t sure I could.

And then I remembered—Lachlan. Coffee shop guy. Didn’t his card say he was in the business of security?

I fished out his business card, the one with his personal number, and finally did the thing I’d been too intimidated to do after our first encounter.

I called him.

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12

LACHLAN

COOPER'S VOICE WAS the last I'd expected to hear on the other end of the line. It'd been a week since I gave him my number in the coffee shop, and to my surprise, he hadn't used it.

Then again, he'd had a late night visit from my alter ego instead, so I'd done a great job of fucking up that whole situation.

No matter. The panic in his voice had me canceling the rest of my workday, and as I approached his building I saw him nervously pacing out the front. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest in a protective way, and he was chewing on his thumbnail as he walked back and forth. It was clear whatever had happened in his apartment was enough for him not be in there, and the second he looked up and saw me, the relief on his face was clear.

It also made me fucking hard, made that feral, protective inner beast want to scoop him up and get him the hell out of there. Somewhere safe, where no one could touch him.

"Lachlan," he said, meeting me halfway, dropping his arms by his side, "thank you for coming. I'm sorry it's so random. I just wasn't sure what to do, and then you popped into my head and I remembered you're the CEO of a security company, and—"

"I'm glad you called, Cooper. That's why I gave you my number."

"Oh. Right. Well, I…I meant to call you before this. But then I thought maybe you were just being nice and I didn't want to bother you. And I

realize I should've probably called the police, but, well, I don't know if they should be involved, and—"

"Cooper." I gripped him by his upper arms and waited until he looked me in the eyes. Eyes that were laced with apprehension. He was wound up, for good reason, but he'd made the right decision. "You did the right thing calling me."

He nodded and then exhaled slowly. "Okay. Thank you."

I inclined my head toward the building, careful not to automatically look up to where I knew his apartment was. "Now, why don't you show me what happened?"

"Okay." He started toward the door, but then spun back to face me and said, "Whatever you do, don't say what you're really here for when Ms. Edith asks."

"Ms. Edith?"

"My incredibly nosy landlord. Just pretend you're a friend."

"Or a boyfriend?" Cooper's cheeks colored a delicious shade of pink that made me want to feel their warmth under my lips, but I managed to restrain myself.

Not something that was usually in my wheelhouse.

"Relax, Cooper. You and I *are* friends. No pretending necessary."

He swallowed and nodded, but his foot caught on a break in the sidewalk as he turned around. Before he busted it on the concrete, I sprang forward, catching him firmly by the waist.

This close to him, feeling him in my arms with his heady scent filling my lungs, brought me back to how he'd felt beneath me, the way he'd arched his back, thrusting his ass up to give me another taste—

Fuck. Before the memory took over every rational sense I had left, I made sure he was steady on his feet and took my hands off him. I wasn't here for sex—I was here because he'd called me to help him. And that help didn't, unfortunately, include multiple orgasms.

Cooper blinked at me, seemingly as distracted as I was, but then led the way into his building. I hadn't been through the entrance yet, and it was just as cramped and old as his space. We started up the staircase that creaked every other step—definitely smarter to climb through his window—and a rough-hewn voice behind us said, "And just who might this be?"

To his credit, Cooper didn't stop, continuing the climb as he called out, "Just a friend, Ms. Edith. Nothing to worry about."

“If I hear you two messing around, I’ll give you something to worry about.”

Over my shoulder, I gave the old woman my most charming, least-threatening smile. She clearly wasn’t expecting it, because her mouth fell open and she slammed her door shut.

Well, she wouldn’t be following us.

“I’m at the top,” Cooper said quietly. “I know it’s a trek.”

If he only knew this wasn’t my first visit to his private space.

Once we reached the fifth floor, he didn’t bother unlocking it, just opened it and gestured for me to go in first.

“Was it unlocked when you arrived?” I asked.

He nodded. “The door was open. I got pissed because I thought maybe it was Ms. Edith going through my things, but then I walked in and…” He waved a hand at the mess I could see from the hallway.

I went to walk inside, accustomed to Libertine’s kind of self-reliance when it came to handling criminal matters. But this was Cooper, and he was a normal, everyday, law-abiding citizen in New York, and I had to remind myself that there were steps and protocols for what happened when a crime was committed in the city.

“You said you thought about calling the police, but called me instead. Do you still feel that way? Because if you don’t, you should call before I go in there.”

I presented the choice as though it didn’t bother me either way, but deep down I was hoping he held tight to his original conviction. I’d been careful the night I crept through his window. But I wasn’t stupid enough to believe I hadn’t left some kind of trace evidence behind after fucking him into his mattress.

Reckless. Sloppy. Unplanned.

King’s words repeated on a loop in my head with frustrating accuracy.

“No… I… There’s something I need to show you.” Cooper gnawed on his lower lip as if trying to decide whether he was doing the right thing. “The reason I think this might’ve happened.”

“Okay, do you mind if I…” I gestured toward the open door.

“No, please, go ahead.”

I stepped through the doorway and took in the complete and utter destruction. His shit was everywhere it shouldn’t be: clothes on the floor, drawers pulled open and emptied of all contents, his sheets—the ones we’d

made a mess of that night—tossed as though the perpetrator had been searching for something.

I stopped once I reached the middle of his place and turned back to see him frozen by the entrance.

“They really did a number in here. It’s a mess.”

Cooper frowned, and I wanted to slap myself upside the head. How the fuck would I know this was a mess compared to usual?

Hello, genius, Lachlan *has never been here before. Remember?*

But Cooper merely looked around at the chaos and nodded. “It really is. I’m usually much neater than this, I swear.”

It seemed his consternation was over the mess, not my reaction, his mind too busy trying to work out what had happened to realize my fuck-up.

“You said you had something to show me?”

“Right.” Cooper rushed inside past me and to the computer desk that sat by his window. The same window I’d watched him from, the same one I’d climbed inside of, but that was the last thing I needed to think about now.

He grabbed the backpack resting on his desk chair and unzipped it. Then he peeled back the front flap and pulled off the logo’s lining, revealing a small metallic rectangle the size of a credit card.

“I think it’s a key card.”

I reached for it, and when I turned over the cool metal item and caught sight of the symbol on it, I cursed inwardly. I knew exactly what the fuck I was holding.

Cooper was right, this *was* a key card—one that belonged to the dealers I’d been surveying the night I ran into him. The same dealers who were putting people in morgues after one hit from their product.

No wonder they’d tossed Cooper’s place. One of those fuckwads I’d laid out in the alley must’ve dropped it.

But how did Cooper get a hold of it? He’d been too busy trying not to die.

“Where did you get this?”

Cooper’s eyes widened at my harsh tone, but then he said, “I, uh, don’t know. I must’ve picked it up by accident somewhere.”

Bullshit he didn’t know. He just didn’t want to tell me for whatever reason. But that was fine. I didn’t need him to go into details; I knew most of them already. It was clear he’d gotten his hands on it sometime during the commotion that night, maybe when he dropped his phone. It didn’t

matter either way—he had the damn thing, and I knew that was the reason behind his apartment's ransacking.

I turned to take another look at the place, sweeping my eyes over every upturned item. "Was anything taken?" I asked, just to cover my bases, and Cooper shook his head. "But you think they were here for this?" I held the card up between my fingers.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"But you just said you think this is why they were here." I knew I was pushing, but I wanted to see if he'd give me anything more, if he'd admit why he was in that alley that night and clear up at least one of the mysteries that had been plaguing me since I laid eyes on him. "Why would you think that? What is this?"

Cooper swiped his tongue along his lower lip. "I don't know what it is."

So now we were *both* dealing in half-truths. The only difference was, I knew it. He didn't.

"It's the only thing that's different that I can think of," he rushed out. "I mean, if they were going to rob the place, why leave my computer? Or the cash in the jar over on the counter? They didn't take any of that, and, well, it appears they were looking for something. Right?"

I nodded and took another look at the card in my hand. "It definitely seems that way, and if they went to all this trouble to find it, I think it's a safe bet that they aren't going to stop."

Cooper's fingers tightened around the backpack. "You think they're going to come back?"

"It's highly likely." Drug dealers in general weren't the kind of people to let some random person walk around with anything that belonged to them. They'd somehow connected Cooper to the failed deal and tracked his ass down. He wasn't safe here, and there was no way I was going to leave him behind. "I think it might be best if you come with me for now. Until we can look into this some more and make sure you're safe."

Cooper's eyes widened at my suggestion. "Come with you? Like, you mean stay with you?"

"Yes. I'll take you somewhere safe."

Cooper's eyes shifted past my shoulder to the window, then back to me, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was worried his masked stranger

wouldn’t be able to find him if he said yes.

Now that was a laugh.

“Um, how long do you think I’ll be gone?”

“However long it takes.”

He took another look around the room, and not wanting him to say no, I decided to help him out a little with his decision. I took a step toward him and reached for the backpack, brushing my fingers over the back of his. The connection between us crackled to life as it always did, and I wasn’t above using it.

“I can see you’re scared,” I said. “You have every reason to be. But this is what I do. That’s why you called me.”

“You’re right.” Cooper’s blue eyes locked with mine, his concern dissipating. “You’re absolutely right.”

“Good. Then why don’t you throw some clothes in this backpack, and I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

He nodded then moved around the room grabbing clothes and stuffing them into his bag. I slipped the card in my wallet and watched him closely, tracking his every move freely now instead of from the shadows.

It was strange watching him in the light of day like this, only adding to the illusion that there were two of me. This version of me could be the protector he’d met at a coffee shop, and something about that turned me on almost as much as being the masked stranger who unleashed Cooper’s wildest desires in the darkness of night.

“I’m ready,” he said, pulling me from my thoughts.

I refocused on the gorgeous man standing in front of me in his jeans, hoodie, and sneakers, his backpack slung over his shoulder and his computer in his hands. I had no business taking him where I was about to, especially considering he was a journalist. But I was already in King’s bad books, and I hadn’t saved Cooper just to have him wind up dead.

“There’s one last thing I have to ask before we go,” I said.”

Cooper looked at me expectantly.

“Do you trust me?”

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13

COOPER

I WAS STARTING to wonder if I had a death wish.

I'd gone all in on trusting someone I barely knew, and what had that gotten me?

A blindfold. Also a ride in a comfy vehicle with heated seats to some destination unknown, but a *blindfold*? That was what I'd signed up for when a handsome face said, "Do you trust me?" Not to mention the whole host of other bad ideas I didn't want to think about right now. Not when I needed to focus on putting one foot in front of the other as Lachlan's firm hand around my arm led me *somewhere*. "Somewhere safe," he'd said, but how the hell was I supposed to believe that when I couldn't even be trusted to see where we were going?

Maybe my family was right—I didn't belong here. Following drug dealers, almost dying, allowing a stranger to climb in my window to fuck me, having an actual break-in… I was asking for trouble to find me. Begging for it, even.

The ding of an elevator sounded, and then Lachlan moved us into the claustrophobic space. When the doors shut, all of the background noise I'd tried to place disappeared and silence descended. It felt like we were the only two here, which meant Lachlan's earlier warning of "don't say a word" didn't count here, right?

Besides, my patience was waning, and I wanted answers.

"Can I take this off?" I reached up to tug at the blindfold, but Lachlan caught my wrist in his firm grip.

“No.”

Stifling a sigh, I said, “Can you tell me where we’re going?”

“We’re almost there.”

“Almost where?”

“Somewhere safe. Like I promised.”

Now why did an overwhelming part of me actually believe that?

I had no sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

Another ding, doors opening, and we were off, though not to anywhere as loud as where we’d entered. It was quiet, too quiet, and I wondered if Lachlan could hear the way my heart pounded with every step I took.

Somewhere safe, I told myself, *that’s all this is.*

But all I could see behind this blindfold were the images of my trashed apartment. It wasn’t like I had much, but the little I owned had been strewn everywhere. I hadn’t thought anyone followed me that night in the alley, but obviously I was wrong. Had they been following me all this time? They wanted the key card. That had to be it…right?

Even Lachlan seemed to recognize the symbol, which raised a whole other set of questions if I came out of this alive. Hell, maybe that would be *my* superpower—putting myself in danger and surviving by the skin of my teeth. That was what journalists did to find the truth.

No. I’m going somewhere safe. Somewhere that isn’t my trashed apartment.

They hadn’t entered through the front, that was for sure—I would’ve endured a thirty-minute rant from Ms. Edith on having visitors when I wasn’t home—so that could only mean they’d entered through my window. Same as the stranger I’d happily welcomed.

There was no way *he* would’ve done it, though. He’d had every opportunity to hurt me or find what he was looking for when I was flat on my stomach and bare-assed. No need to break in and trash the place.

No, this was all connected to the group I’d been tracking since I left Colorado. I’d bet money on it.

A lock clicked, something opened, and then Lachlan said, “You can take that off now.”

I ripped the blindfold off and blinked under the assault of the brightly lit room. Well, *room* was putting it mildly—the place was huge, especially by New York City standards. It was sheer golden opulence, from the chandeliers to the ornate sofas and artwork splashed along the textured

walls. Thick velvet floor-to-ceiling curtains covered most of one wall, and I had a feeling they were blocking out one hell of a city view.

I let out a low whistle as I walked farther inside, set my laptop aside, and let my backpack fall from my shoulders onto one of the chairs. All right, so maybe I'd been worked up about nothing, because this was definitely an upgrade from my shitty studio. Was this Lachlan's place? Why had that required a blindfold? Unless he just didn't trust that I wouldn't become some needy guy who showed up unexpectedly.

My eyes were drawn to an abstract landscape painting in a heavy frame, and my brow furrowed. "You know, no offense, but I wouldn't have thought a place like this was your style."

"It's not."

I whirled around to face him. "This isn't your apartment?"

"No," he said, making a sweep of the rooms that branched off the main living space.

"Where are we?"

Lachlan paused in a doorway. "It's better if you don't know."

"Why's that?"

He shook his head. "You're somewhere safe. That's the important thing."

"So if the situation were reversed, you'd go along with whatever I said, no questions asked?"

A low chuckle rumbled out of him as he slid his hands into his pants pockets and crossed over to me. Given the situation, the last thing I should be doing was checking him out, but Lachlan Stone filled out a suit to perfection. I'd forgotten just how good looking he was.

"No," he said, "I wouldn't."

When I opened my mouth to respond, *Then why should I*, he held his hand up.

"I know you have questions, but now's not the time. I need to meet with my team and brief them on the situation. Try to make yourself comfortable. No one will bother you here."

Comfortable? No problem. The place looked like a high-end suite at a hotel. Comfort wouldn't be an issue.

As Lachlan walked back to the door, I couldn't help but let my gaze drift down over him. The man looked as good leaving as he did coming, and my brain went straight to the gutter. But the one chance I'd had to call him

and ask for a date I'd let slide, and instead only called him when I needed him in a professional capacity.

Way to go, moron.

But it wouldn't have been fair to call him up when my mind had been so consumed by my mystery man. Whom I'd now miss if he decided to pay me a visit again. That was, if he wasn't the one who'd wrecked my apartment in the first place.

It seemed Lachlan and I were on the same wavelength regarding that, though. Whoever had broken in had been after the key card, and that *definitely* wasn't what my vigilante had been interested in.

Lachlan glanced back at me as he reached for the door, and I gave a hesitant wave, then he pulled it shut and was gone.

I let out a sigh, looked around the enormous room, and headed over to the windows. Just as I'd suspected, there was a spectacular view of the city hiding behind those curtains, confirming we were in a high rise, probably at the very top.

Wherever Lachlan had brought me was definitely not cheap, that was for sure.

My curiosity took over as I started to move around the suite. He hadn't mentioned anything about staying in one room, so I decided to do a little investigating. I made my way to a set of French doors that opened into another room decorated in much the same way. The difference was the enormous bed situated to face the stunning view.

Holy shit. That bed was definitely bigger than a king, and the amount of pillows on it engaged some childish urge to run over and launch myself on them.

I didn't of course, because how embarrassing would that be if Lachlan came back and saw me face-planting into the plush bed—but seriously, who lived like this?

Well, not *lived*—Lachlan had said this wasn't his place. He'd also implied he was going to talk to his team somewhere in this building.

So was this where he worked? Doubtful. What kind of security firm had a penthouse with a multimillion-dollar view? Unless it was some kind of safe house? He did say that was where he was taking me, but every "safe house" I'd seen on TV was some shithole or cabin in the woods. Not some upper-class Manhattan address. It screamed money. Excess. Luxury.

Which made me wonder…

I fished my cell out of my pocket and headed back to the main living space. Maybe I could get my location through the Find My Phone app.

I swiped my phone open and saw no signal. Not even one bar. I'd figured a place as decked out as this would have cell reception. But maybe it was like hospital—they always had shit service. Something about thick walls and all the technology in it.

That was probably it: he ran a security company, and if this was part of it, the walls were probably fortified or something. But surely he had some kind of Wi-Fi setup.

I opened the settings on my phone, but nothing appeared. Not even some random neighbor with a weirdly named router that was unsecured. It was like every kind of possible signal was jammed.

Fuck. I glanced around the room, suddenly feeling paranoid. Had I trusted the wrong guy after all? Had I been…kidnapped?

No. That was just ridiculous. *I'd* called *him*, for fuck's sake. But still, I didn't know where I was and couldn't call anyone to get me the hell out if this wasn't on the up-and-up. That had me rethinking my choices.

I started toward the door, my steps getting progressively faster as the very real possibility that I was—

I was locked inside this apartment.

Well, shit.

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14

LACHLAN

A LOW, MISCHIEVOUS laugh echoed off the stone walls the second I crossed the threshold that led to the private Libertine headquarters.

"I leave for a few weeks and this is what I come back to?" The end of a clove cigarette—or kretek—sparked in the dark, and then the sweet and spicy smoke floated in my direction. Theodore "Theo" Rinaldi stepped out from the shadows, a smirk tilting his full lips. "Seems like you've been up to no good, Lachlan."

"And let me guess—you approve?"

"Always." He grinned and joined me to head into the meeting room. He offered me the kretek, and I took a drag before handing it back to him.

"You really should quit this shit. It'll kill you."

"I'd rather go out this way than by King's hand. From what I hear, you may not last the night."

"From what you hear? Let me guess, Benoit?"

"Your indiscretions reach far and wide, my friend."

Great. Now not only did I have to deal with the fallout from bringing Cooper here, but now the rest of my brothers knew the extent to which I'd fucked up.

"So you came back from your royal duties just to rub this shit in my face?" I said.

"Would you blame me?" He took another drag, and then put the cigarette out against the stone wall. "But no, your activities aren't a top priority for me. This is just a happy coincidence."

“Lucky me.”

“If it helps, I brought you back a few bags of the Indonesian coffee you like.”

“That’s supposed to make up for the ball busting you’re all about to give me?”

As we came to the iron door, Theo winked at me under the flickering candles. “Come on, Lachlan. Ball busting is what you live for.”

I couldn’t deny that, not when I had Cooper stashed in one of the spare penthouses upstairs.

God, fucking Cooper. He’d gotten himself in more trouble than he even realized, and somehow the fuckers from that alley had tracked him down. It had to be the goddamn driver that got away from me, and that pissed me off to no end. I didn’t *make* mistakes, yet since the first night I’d seen Cooper, that was all I’d been doing, one fuck-up after another, and now I had to deal with the consequences. I couldn’t just leave him at his place, not when it was clear those fuckers hadn’t gotten what they came for and would be back. What the hell had he even been doing with their key card? Cooper thought *he* had questions? I wanted to pry him open and see what else he was hiding.

And I wasn’t even going to acknowledge the way my cock got hard knowing I was the reason he was safe right now.

Theo and I entered the chamber, the two of us making it a full house, as the rest of the men were already gathered at the carved-from-boulder round table that sat in the throne room. Conversation stopped and all eyes fell on me. There was displeasure in King’s and amusement in Benoit’s.

“I wasn’t away *that* long,” Theo said as he took his seat to the right of King. “No need to throw a party.”

I took the seat beside Alessio, as far away from King as possible.

“We’re just shocked to see you here.” Lucien Vale grinned, a devil-may-care gleam in his eyes. “The weather is much nicer in your part of the world than New York this time of year.”

“I would agree with you there, but since I consider *everywhere* my part of the world, I figured I should show my face if there was going to be some kind of disciplinary action taking place.”

“First of all, fuck you,” I said to the asshole laughing at my current predicament. “And second, the last time I checked, disciplinary action went out a couple centuries ago. We’re still free citizens down here.”

A low curse to King's left had my eyes shifting to the last of our group, Shep. That wasn't his full name but a nickname we'd bestowed on him because "Shepard O'Neil Winchester III" was such a fucking mouthful that no one could be bothered.

"You got something to say over there?" I snapped, my tone a little more hostile than it should be toward King's second-in-command.

Shep straightened in his chair, the annoyance radiating off his tailored black suit almost on par with King's, but I wasn't looking in *his* direction yet. One obstacle at a time, and it seemed Shep was going to be the first.

"I said, *fucking typical*."

"Meaning?"

"*Meaning* that your impulsive behavior has once again landed us in a world of shit. You say we're free citizens down here, but how long do you think that's going to last when you're hellbent on revealing all of your"—he looked around the table—"I'm sorry, *our* secrets to a fucking *journalist*?"

My head whipped in Alessio's direction, and before I could ream him a new one for going to King with the information I'd had him dig up on Cooper, he grimaced. "Sorry, man."

I guessed I couldn't blame him. Not really. Not when *I'd* been the one breaking rules. So I turned my attention back to Shep.

"I didn't tell Cooper shit."

"No? Correct me if I'm wrong here, but isn't he currently sitting in one of the penthouse suites of this very building?"

My jaw tightened as I narrowed my eyes on the mouthy fucker. "Correct me if *I'm* wrong, but the last time I checked, I don't answer to you."

"That's enough." King's voice was deadly calm as it reverberated across the space. "I thought I made it clear the last time we spoke that any kind of interaction with this man was to be wiped from existence."

"You did, but—"

"The word *but* in the middle of a sentence almost always means the first half of what you said is complete and utter bullshit." King narrowed his eyes, and it was like a shot of ice through my veins. "So how about you start again, and this time try not to blow smoke up my ass first."

It was a rare day that a meeting at this table was so quiet, but then again, I couldn't remember the last time King had looked like he wanted to kill one of us.

Oh wait, yes I can, it was me…last week.

“He has one of Mick’s key cards.”

There, that was the truth. No bullshit. Alessio had done his part in finding out who the head of the snake was after ID’ing the dealers in the alley. Mick Shaughnessy. This also conveniently allowed me to leave out the part where I stalked and met Cooper as Lachlan last week and then had sex with him in my Libertine garb.

“Mick? The dealer we’re after? How?” King demanded, and I was close to telling him that I was about to find out before I was summoned down here. But considering the tension in the air, I held back.

“I don’t know yet. I’m assuming he picked it up that night in the alley.”

“That explains one thing.” King drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “But not how he ended up here.”

Fuck. Couldn’t he just let that part go?

“He called me.”

“Oh, this just gets better and better.” Benoit swiveled in his seat to face me, a cheeky smile curving his lips. “How did *that* come about?”

“A quick internet search?” Theo snorted, knowing full well it wasn’t easy to find our numbers. “What did he type in? *Masked Manhattan Hero*?”

“He didn’t meet me in Manhattan, and I’m not a fucking hero.”

“Then how did he get your number?” King’s question was direct and left no room for me to skirt the edges this time.

“I gave it to him.” When King didn’t respond, I knew that was my cue to continue. Seemed I wasn’t getting out of this without confessing *all* my secrets. “I wanted to make sure he was okay after what happened—”

“Since when?” Lucien said, shaking his head. “Aren’t you usually the one who says less is more when it comes to targets?”

“He wasn’t a target.”

“Okay, even worse. Some innocent guy stumbles onto a drug deal and now you’re, what? Feeling guilty about laying out those fuckers in front of him?”

“I didn’t say that.” Even though I’d been thinking it. It was obvious Cooper had been affected by what he saw. His paranoia was at an all-time high, but then again it was clear now that someone other than me was following him. “Look, he had a gun pointed at his head, saw things he shouldn’t have, and I wanted to make sure he didn’t do something stupid, like go to the cops.”

“And did he?” Shep asked.

“No. Because I gave him an alternative.”

“You.”

“That’s right. I’m in security, remember? The two guys that are assigned to trail you, they’re mine. But maybe I’ll have them look the other way if you keep acting like an uptight prick.”

King turned to his right, leveling Shep with a *shut it* look before turning his attention back to me. “Continue.”

“I found a way to introduce myself as Lachlan, told him I was in security, and that if he ever needed me to call.” I left out that I’d done it mostly to see him again rather than thinking he might actually need my skills. “Something that proved favorable, I’d say, since we now have this.”

I pulled the key card from my wallet and handed it to Alessio, who inspected it. If anyone could pull any kind info off that thing, it was him.

“One of Mick’s guys must’ve tossed Cooper’s place looking for this,” I said. “It’s got to be important.”

“I agree, but that doesn’t mean I like the way you went about it. You brought a journalist into our midst. To a place where all of our secrets are locked up tight. If that ever were to be breached—”

“It won’t be.”

“—I don’t need to tell you how catastrophic that would be. There’s a reason your brothers are pissed off with you right now.”

I glanced around the table at the men staring me down. All of us were guarding secrets, and had vowed to keep those secrets and uphold the bonds that Libertine asked of us when we became heads of the organization. We’d essentially signed our lives over, and in return got to live the life of Kings.

By day, we ran with the elite, untouchable and more connected than anyone could ever imagine. But by night, we reveled in the darkness of our secrets, pulling strings that made the city bow to our whims.

As far as dressings-down went, guilt was always the most effective. Going on the attack would only put me on the defense. But guilt over betraying my fellow Kings—now *that* was something I felt remorse over.

“I understand,” I said. “I should’ve come to you all first. I get that.”

“Good.” King gestured for the key card and looked it over. “But since you have this, I think it’s smart to have Alessio look into it. Hopefully he can give us some insight to what it opens, and we can make a plan from there.”

I nodded. “I agree. That’s exactly what I wanted to do.”

King’s lips tightened. “I’m so glad that my plan lines up with yours.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

He turned to Alessio, probably so he wouldn’t climb over the table and strangle me. I couldn’t blame him, either. I’d really been going out of my way to aggravate the situation.

“You think you can get something off this?”

“Depends on what it is,” Alessio said. “Might open a door. Might have some sort of encryption embedded on it. Either way, that symbol says it’s connected to Mick.”

“Then I’ll leave it with you.”

“Got it.”

“As for you”—King looked back at me—“you are to keep eyes on your little journalist at *all* times. That means *you* are to stay with him.”

I was a babysitter now? “But—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Lachlan. You brought him here, you watch him. That means eyes on him *at all times*.”

Benoit’s chuckle had me looking his way. “You think this is funny?”

“I think it’s…fate.”

“Fate my ass.”

“*Mon cher*, isn’t this what you wanted?”

It was, but I wasn’t about to admit it.

“Now you can look at the man all you like. King just gave you permission.”

Huh—he did, didn’t he…

“Don’t even think about complicating this further,” King said. “I said keep your eyes on him. Not your hands, and definitely not your dick.”

But it was too late. The seed Benoit had planted was already taking root. The only question was, would Cooper be interested in passing the time with Lachlan? Or was he still too hung up on his masked stranger to give me a second glance?

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15

COOPER

SOMETHING BRIGHT BURNED the back of my eyelids, and I turned my head on the pillow, seeking out the shadows. The dark reprieve was temporary, as whatever it was followed, and I felt the warmth on my face radiate down my body.

It was annoying and forced me out of a deep sleep, but as I came to, awareness dawned that I wasn't at home—I was in some palatial penthouse, and at some point while Lachlan had been gone, I must've fallen asleep.

Shit. I hadn't meant to do that.

I lifted a hand to shield my eyes and slowly forced them open to see Lachlan sitting by the window. He'd pushed the curtain beside him open a few inches, directing the sun straight at me.

As my eyes cleared, the strangest sense of déjà vu ran through me, but I brushed it aside when he said, "I would've thought you'd choose one of the beds."

"No, I…" I squinted at the brightness, and he let the curtain drop. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. What time is it?"

"Ten."

I bolted upright. "In the morning?"

Lachlan cocked his head, faint amusement on his lips as he waited for me to work it out.

Obviously I knew it wasn't bedtime, but the fact that I'd slept that long and hard somewhere I wasn't familiar with surprised me.

Dressed in an impeccably tailored dark blue suit and tie, Lachlan looked ready to conduct a high-powered business meeting, not sit here waiting for me to wake up. Though I couldn't deny he was an incredible sight first thing—not that he was having the same experience of me right now.

I looked down at my rumpled shirt, jeans, and the hoodie I'd taken off at some point and hoped like hell that my hair wasn't sticking up all over the place like it usually did in the mornings.

As I ran my fingers through it to smooth it down, I said, "Did you just get back?"

"No."

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I just did."

"No, I mean when you got back."

Lachlan crossed an ankle over his knee and lounged back casually, making an incredibly sexy picture. My dick took notice immediately, and I tugged the throw resting over me up to cover my hips.

"Why would I do that?" he said. "You were sleeping."

"Sleeping…where, exactly?" Before he could respond, I added, "And don't say 'somewhere safe.'"

"But you are. Your comatose sleep proves it."

No kidding. I'd slept so hard I felt discombobulated, but I needed my head screwed on straight, because the list of questions I had for him was a mile long.

"So…?" I waited for him to answer, and when he didn't, I pressed on. "Is this a safe house or something?" Lachlan was in security; it would only make sense he had access to those. I never would've guessed they'd be on the luxurious side, but I wasn't complaining.

"You can think of it that way."

"You're not going to tell me where, though?"

"In the city."

"What part of the city?"

Lachlan's mouth stayed frustratingly closed, so I decided to try a different line of questioning.

"Where's the key card you took from me? I need it back."

"My guys are looking into it now."

"Your guys?"

“Yes.” He raised a brow when I jumped up off the couch and tossed the throw aside. “Is there a problem, Cooper?”

“*Yes*, there’s a problem. That belongs to me.”

“Actually, it belongs to a guy called Mick.”

“Who?”

“Mick Shaughnessy. The boss of one of the biggest drug rings in New York.”

I swallowed and tried to process the fact that I now had a name, but how had Lachlan found that information first?

“Want to tell me how you came about having it in your possession?”

Not really. “I found it.”

“Where?” When I kept my mouth clamped shut, he leaned back into the couch and crossed his arms. “I’m curious, Cooper. You happened to find something that belongs to a group of dangerous criminals, and you don’t seem all that surprised to find out that information. Which tells me you know exactly whom you stole from.”

“I didn’t steal anything. I must’ve scooped it up by accident—”

“And where was that?”

Why was he looking at me like he already knew the answer? Did running a security company mean he had access I couldn’t even dream about? Shit, had he somehow found out I was in the alley that night? There was no way.

“Tell you what,” he said, pushing off the couch. “Why don’t you tell me more about you instead. Are you seeing anyone?”

My brows shot up. “Asking because you’re interested, or…?”

“Because if you’re dating someone, they might be connected to this.”

“Oh.” Of course he was only asking in a professional capacity. “No, I’m not dating anyone.”

“Fucking anyone?”

“What? No.”

“Are you sure?”

There’s no way he knows about masked mystery man, so just play it cool. “Look, I haven’t been in the city long enough to meet anyone—”

“You met me.”

“Well…” I didn’t have an answer for that, because I was still kicking myself for not calling him earlier.

“And you were obviously somewhere you shouldn’t be if you ‘found’ the key card, as you say. Listen, the only way I can look after you is if you start talking.”

I bit down on my lip, wondering just how much I should say, but since Lachlan already seemed to know answers to some of the questions I had, maybe we could help each other out.

“You can tell me,” he added. “Or I could always take your laptop and have my—”

“You can’t take my laptop.”

“I can do whatever I want. You’re in my place.” Lachlan stood and strolled over to me. “But you’re right, I don’t want to take your laptop. I *want* you to tell me where you got the key card and what you know about it.”

“I don’t know anything about it.”

“Let’s say I believe that. You still didn’t answer the first question. Where you got it.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Anyone ever tell you you’re annoyingly persistent?”

“I would’ve thought that was a quality someone like you would admire.”

That piqued my interest. “Someone like me?”

“A journalist.”

My eyes widened at his observation because as far as I could remember, I’d never told him what I did for a living.

“What makes you think I’m a journalist?”

“I’m in security. I know your name. It wasn’t difficult to run a check on you. So now that we’ve got that little detail out in the open, why don’t you tell me how you came to be in possession of a key card that belongs to one of the biggest drug runners in the city?”

“I told you—”

“A lie. I know it and you know it. So try again.”

Jesus, and I thought *I* was tenacious. If his security job ever fell through, he seriously should look into journalism. Though, judging by my surroundings, it appeared he was rather good at what he did.

“Fine. I followed a guy.”

Lachlan cocked his head. “You followed a guy? Be more specific. Was it for drugs? Were you trying to make a purchase?”

“What? No. I don’t do drugs. Never have and never will.”

“Good. Their shit is killing people.”

“I know,” I blurted out before realizing I’d just given away more than I’d planned to.

“Ah, okay. ” Lachlan crossed his arms over his chest, and my eyes immediately fell to the broad build of his shoulders and the way his suit jacket hugged them. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Who died?”

“What?”

“I’m guessing you’re here chasing a story, am I right?”

A little too right, damn him.

“Someone close to you took the drugs and died. You want to know who supplied it. So who died?”

The fuck? How did he do that? It was like he’d reached inside my mind and pulled out all the information he wanted.

“Cooper?”

“A…friend. It was a few months ago, back in Colorado.” What the hell. He already knew most of it—might as well tell him the rest. “The packet he had with him had the same symbol as that key card.”

“And so you came here looking for a story?”

“I came here looking to *expose* them. I want to find out who’s supplying the drugs and how they got to my friend.”

“So you decided to follow some drug dealers and that’s how you got this card?”

“Look, I know it wasn’t the smartest move. I almost died that night,” I admitted, and I could’ve sworn I saw Lachlan’s jaw bunch. “But it was worth it if this helps me catch them.”

“Fucking hell, you’re naïve.” Lachlan turned away, and I grabbed his arm, spinning him back to face me.

“Excuse me?”

“I said, you’re *naïve*. You said it yourself. You almost got killed following these assholes. How’d you get away?”

A flash of my sexy vigilante popped into my head and left me momentarily speechless.

“Cooper?”

I blinked Lachlan back into focus. “Luck, I guess. But that must’ve been where I picked the key card up.”

“Well, finally, the truth comes out. Was that so hard?”

“No.” I glared at him. “But I don’t generally run around sharing sources or information about the stories I’m writing. The last thing I need is someone else getting a scoop on something so important. Plus, you’ve seen my place—I kind of need a job.”

“Trust me.” He looked me dead in the eye. “I don’t want to steal your story. I’m trying to keep you alive.”

A shiver raced through me at the direct way he held my stare, and as his words lingered between us, I let out a breath. “I’m starting to understand that.”

Lachlan’s lips quirked. “Just starting to, huh?”

“Look, it’s been a rough twenty-four hours, but I’m getting there. You said the key card is with your team?”

“That’s right. They’re looking into it now.”

“Do you have any idea what it is? You obviously recognized the symbol. Who it belonged to.”

“That’s all we know so far. We’re trying to work out what it goes with now,” Lachlan said. “You said you followed a guy and that’s how you got this card. Where did you follow him from? Unless you just happened to stumble across a drug deal.”

“Uh…”

“Cooper?”

“I tracked the drugs to this club. At least, I *think* it’s a club? There was no name on the place, you’d never even know it was there by day, but I found some empty packets in the street outside and…waited. I waited for days—or nights, I guess—to see if anyone would come out of there that I could follow.”

“Why not go in?”

“Trust me when I say I’m not the kind of clientele they were letting in. Everyone that arrived at that place wore something that screamed money.” I gestured to my clothes. “Mine clearly do not.”

The way Lachlan ran his eyes over me made me feel like that didn’t matter. Like maybe he’d rather I didn’t wear anything at all.

I had to be reading too much into things, though. Why would a guy like Lachlan—obviously well connected and fucking gorgeous—even look twice in my direction? A guy like that could get anyone he wanted. Not like I wasn’t a catch when I was more in my element, but this wasn’t even in the stratosphere of normal for me.

“Cooper?”

I startled, realizing he’d asked something while I was spaced out. “Sorry, what?”

“I asked you for the location of the club.”

“Why?” I asked. “Will you and your team go there?”

“Thought about it.”

Oh hell no. If he was planning to get inside, I wasn’t getting left behind. I’d watched that place for too many hours to count, and I’d be damned if I wasn’t getting *some* kind of information from it.

Straightening my shoulders, I said, “Well, if you’re going, then take me with you and I’ll show you where it is myself.”

“Fuck no.”

I reared back. “*Excuse* me?”

“You heard me. They’ve got the drop on you. It’s too risky.”

Logically, that made sense. But screw logic right now. “Then I’m not telling you a thing.”

Where I thought Lachlan might get annoyed at my refusal, he only smirked. “Trying to be difficult, Cooper? We want the same things.”

“No, I want to be involved—you want to keep me locked up here while you get to do the fun shit.”

Lachlan barked out a sharp laugh and rubbed a hand over the stubble at his jaw. “So putting yourself in dangerous situations is what gets you off, huh?”

I could see why it seemed that way. Hell, I’d probably think the same thing about me, and he didn’t even know about my tryst with the masked man.

“No. But you’ve already got the key card, there’s no Wi-Fi here, and now you want the rest of what I know? It’s not fair.”

“How about this,” he said, sliding his hands into his pockets. I tried and failed not to notice the impressive outline of his cock. “I’ll give you a full debriefing when I return.”

“*Or* I go with you.”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Cooper.”

“Why?” I kicked my chin up as he stepped in so close the toes of his shoes bumped against mine. “Because you’re used to getting what you want?”

He lowered his eyes briefly to my lips. “I think you know the answer to that.”

All the breath left my body.

God, why was I getting hard when nothing about this situation warranted it? He was just so close, and *so* damn good looking. I could practically feel his breath on my lips, and it made my knees weak.

But I was determined to go with him. I had to.

I tried one last time. “Lachlan, *please*?”

Apparently that really was the magic word, because Lachlan stared at me for a long time and then sighed.

“If I agree to this, you have to do as I say,” he said reluctantly.

I nodded, ready to accept whatever it took. “I will.”

“Hmm.” He lifted my chin with his finger. “Since you’re being so agreeable, let me set the rest of the ground rules.”

I wanted to balk at having any kind of rules, but something about the seductive tone of his voice lulled me into complying.

“When you’re here,” he said, his voice low as he angled his face toward mine. “I’ll be with you. When you leave, I’ll be with you. No one will be closer to you than I am until we work out who was following you.”

Jesus. My stomach flipped at the sensual promise in his words, even though all he was really saying was that he planned to keep me safe.

Safe with his body? Is that option on the table?

“Do we have a deal?” he said, moving back to look at me.

Damn he was good. I had to remember how to move my mouth again to speak. “Deal.”

Lachlan nodded once. “Good. Now why don’t we order some food?”

As he headed to the gold-embossed sideboard near the door, my brain began to cooperate again, and I realized I’d left out an important piece of information.

“Uh, Lachlan?”

“Yes?”

“There’s just one little problem with this plan.”

He shook his head and pulled out a booklet from one of the drawers. “Now you tell me.”

“It’s just… They’re not gonna let me in wearing this, because…”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll have someone bring you—”

“No, no, not that. I mean, not *just* that. I mean…”

Lachlan turned around and cocked a brow.

“It’s a place that… Well, I think it’s like a…” My words faltered, because now that the reality of going there was hitting, I realized the other reason going inside the club had previously been off the table.

“Yes? Use your words, Cooper. Isn’t that your specialty?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a sex club,” I blurted out, feeling the heat creep up my neck.

Lachlan turned back around to face me. “Pretty sure or very sure?”

“Very. It might not be the sole purpose, but things definitely go on in there.”

“You’re sure you were never a guest at this club?”

“What? No. Of course not.”

He lifted a shoulder. “No judgment. We have one downstairs.”

He said it in such an off-hand way that I almost missed it. My jaw hit the floor, but he didn't notice, and I didn’t get a chance to ask more about it because he was pulling out his phone—that worked?—and brought it to his ear.

“Lucien,” he said a moment later, and then returned his gaze to me. “I’m going to need your expertise.”

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16

LACHLAN

HOURS LATER AND the penthouse had turned into a madhouse.

Italian tailors with racks of clothing at their disposal commandeered one section of the room, a wig master and his assistant in another, and in the center of it all, Cooper sat getting facial prosthetics and glancing in my direction every other minute. The looks varied from accusatory to curious to resigned at how long and involved the process had become.

Lucien hovered over the woman reshaping Cooper's nose and shook his head. "No, we want less Pinocchio, more Prince Charming. He still has to look fuckable."

That earned me another side-eye from Cooper, and I mouthed, *Still want to go?* as Lucien came up beside me.

"Involving me in your indiscretions. How unlike you," Lucien said, but his gaze scanned proudly over those he'd assembled to help get us ready for tonight.

"Don't make me regret this," I said. "And don't even think about breathing a word of this to King or any of the others."

"No one regrets coming to me, Lachlan. You know that."

That charm, as smooth and sinful as butter, didn't work on me. I might've been one of the few who eluded Lucien Vale, but his legendary skills and connections were exactly why he was the perfect man for this job.

"As for keeping secrets," he continued, "if you knew even half of what goes on when people think no one is watching…"

“I’m sure you’ve got every juicy detail recorded and locked away if you ever need to get the upper hand.”

Lucien’s grin grew Cheshire Cat wide. “Would I do that?”

“The mayor just resigned after his sex scandal was blown wide open. Know anything about that?”

“Only that the next time he decides to have an orgy free-for-all after hours in City Hall, he might want to check the ages of those he personally requested from a sex shop overseas.”

“Is that all?” I said drolly.

“And perhaps turn off the building’s security feed. Or pay off the guards. Oh, wait. He can’t anymore.” He lifted a shoulder. “Thoughts and prayers to the mayor.”

I couldn’t help snorting at Lucien’s antics. We’d been working behind the scenes to oust Mayor Peterman, who’d done nothing but cause chaos in the five boroughs since the day he took office, and leave it to Lucien to drive him out in such a dramatic way. He was nothing if not entertaining—and resourceful.

That was why he’d been my first and only call today.

“I think a hat would’ve been just as effective,” Cooper called over to me. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair as the artist making him over started on reshaping his jaw.

“World-renowned designers and creators here giving him an alter ego, and this one wants to wear a dingy baseball cap,” Lucien said, rolling his eyes. “Because of course that’s what men at a sex club are looking for. What do I know?”

I went over to check out the progress on Cooper’s transformation, and as he looked up, I realized they’d given him dark brown contacts. That alone made him look altogether different, harder somehow than with the blue.

“Give me the word, and this can end right now,” I told him.

“No. You just didn’t say anything about a nose job.”

“I said we both need to change our appearances if we’re going to successfully scope things out.”

“Okay, okay.” Cooper looked me over and frowned. “You look the same.”

“Wait for it.” Lucien moved in beside me and gestured to the chair next to Cooper. “Time to make you into a sex god. Although”—he pulled up the

sleeve of his black silk shirt to check his watch—"I'm not sure we have time for such a metamorphosis."

"Fuck you," I said, sliding out of my suit jacket and then unbuttoning my shirt. "Do anything crazy and don't think I won't use the shit I have on you."

"Lachlan, don't tempt me with a good time."

"That was a threat, fucker."

He gave me a slow smile and winked. "To *you*."

I didn't bother kicking his ass right then and there, because Cooper had gone suspiciously quiet. A quick glance proved something had caught his attention, all right, and that something was me.

He was staring, eyes glued to my body as the material parted with every button I flicked free. I shrugged out of the shirt and got a hit of supreme satisfaction when he white-knuckled the arm of the chair.

"Yes, perfect," Lucien said as he looked between the two of us. "This is exactly the vibe you need tonight."

Cooper blinked and jerked his gaze away before frowning at Lucien. "Sorry, what?"

"You continue undressing Lachlan with your eyes, he'll stay hard, and you'll both fit into the scene just fine."

Shit. I couldn't even try to hide the semi that had popped up because of Cooper ogling me, like he was hungry for the rest of my strip show. It didn't matter to my body that now was not the time to remember how intense it felt to be inside him. I wasn't *that* man right now. To Cooper, I was Lachlan, the one he'd called when he was in trouble, not the one breaking the rules and fucking him senseless.

I settled into the chair. "Just fit me with a damn wig or something and get on with it."

Cooper grinned to himself. "I can't wait to see this."

"Keep it up and I'll make sure he gives you a balding one."

"Joke's on you. You're the one who has to look at me."

"All right, gather 'round, everyone, gather 'round," Lucien called out to his team, and seconds later there was a sea of faces staring down at us.

"Luc, what the fuck?" I grumbled as one of the bright makeup lights was turned in my direction.

"We have to create a visual story. *Obviously.*" Lucien gestured to Cooper. "Here we find our sexual submissive. I'm thinking blond, I'm

thinking leather, I'm thinking cuffs. Something sheer for the top to show off that young body."

"I'm not that young," Cooper said.

"For the purposes of tonight, you are." Lucien ran his eyes critically over me, and I forced myself to remember I was the one who'd invited this. "Now here we have our dom. Strong and sexy, but with a touch of sophistication."

I smirked. "So just be myself?"

"If I wanted a savage in a business suit, I'd ask for one." He leaned in toward the tailor, who was taking notes. "Let's put him in all black. Perfectly tailored slacks. A silk shirt unbuttoned down his chest—"

"Hey, fucker, that's what *you're* wearing," I pointed out.

Lucien spread his arms out and did a slow spin to show himself off. "Strong. Sexy. Sophisticated. The perfect combination to have men lining up on their knees."

"Jesus." I rubbed my temple, feeling a sudden headache coming on as Lucien turned his attention back to Cooper.

"Oh, Cooper? How do you feel about tattoos?"

"On myself?"

"On your dom."

Cooper looked at me, and I couldn't get over the drastic change a bit of makeup and prosthetics could do. "I think that'd be hot," he said, but then a teasing gleam entered his eyes. "As a matter of fact, I think you should cover his entire body with tattoos. Every. Single. Inch."

I arched a brow, but kept my thoughts to myself. What I wanted to say was that I knew he didn't need a visual to get off to. He needed a few choice directives from a man in a mask.

Lucien nodded and said to the makeup artist, "Let's do a sexy tattoo going up his neck, maybe peeking out of his shirt. Something to give him a bit of an edge." He clapped his hands to dismiss everyone. "Thank you, let's make some magic, people."

As everyone scattered to their respective corners, Cooper settled back in his chair like he was grateful for the momentary reprieve.

"He's a friend of yours?" he asked.

"Lucien?"

He nodded.

"Are you asking on or off the record?"

“Does it matter?”

“I’m in the security business, Cooper. I can’t have stories dropping about me or anyone I’m involved with.”

“I understand. Don’t worry, *you’re* not my story. Whatever we find, you won’t be included in the narrative. Promise.”

Did I believe him? Considering I dealt in a world of half-truths, I never trusted anyone a hundred percent. Cooper’s real-world naivety made me inclined to trust him, but that didn’t mean I’d put it past him to do whatever served him best in the end. It was what most people would do.

It was what *I* would do.

“Oh, Lachlan?” Lucien tossed something in my direction. “Have your sub give those a whirl.”

Cooper leaned over to get a better look. “What are those?”

“Give me your wrist.”

Cooper held his arm out, and I buckled on the first leather cuff.

“Wow, we’re really leaning into the dom/sub thing, huh?” He lifted his wrist to inspect the cuff and saw the silver hook attached. “Wait, what’s this for?”

I motioned for his other arm and then wrapped the second cuff around his wrist. “Are you familiar with the relationship between a dominant and submissive?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever looked into it.”

As I buckled the cuff, I let my fingers linger a little longer than they needed to over his smooth skin. I traced one of his veins and didn’t miss the way he trembled. “In public a submissive follows orders, bites their tongue, does whatever the dom wants and needs from them. It’s something both participants enjoy, but the truth is, the submissive has all the power. Everything is consensual, and at any point if things go too far, if you want things to stop, all you need to do is say the safe word and we’ll leave. No questions asked.”

He swallowed. “What’s the safe word?”

“You tell me. Something you’ll easily remember that would fit into this world we’re about to step into.”

“Okay.” He chewed on his lower lip. “Since everyone will either be high on sex or drugs, how about…‘euphoric’?”

I nodded once. “Euphoric. Done. If that word comes out of your mouth, everything stops. Deal?”

“Deal. But I can handle it. Whatever happens.”

We would see about that. There was no telling what we were walking into without getting a rundown of what to expect beforehand.

“How do you know so much about this? Are you a…a dom?”

I inclined my head in Lucien’s direction. “Let’s just say that people talk. And they have a lot of interesting stories.”

Cooper’s pulse thrumming beneath my fingers reminded me that I was still holding his wrist, and I let go as one of the assistants came over carrying a bright blond wig.

“That better fucking not be for me,” I said, and when she stopped behind Cooper, he groaned.

“This is payback for the full-body tattoo comment, isn’t it?” With a sigh, he straightened in the chair. “Okay. Do your worst.”

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17

COOPER

"RELAX."

LACHLAN'S SMOOTH voice pulled me from my racing thoughts as our chauffeur for the evening weaved a very expensive-looking car through the bustling Saturday night traffic.

"Relax?" I scoffed. "That might've been an option if I hadn't been herded into a car with a blindfold for the second time in forty-eight hours. You could've just asked me to shut my eyes, you know."

"I could've," Lachlan looked across the backseat and ran unfamiliar eyes down over me. The contacts were...different, but he looked no less attractive somehow. "But I kind of like you in a blindfold."

His answer was as unexpected as my reaction to his new appearance, my dick jerking up ready to sign checks it probably shouldn't be cashing.

"Plus, if this *is* a sex club, you might have to wear one of these to get in." He reached for the silky piece of fabric I'd tossed on the seat between us and rubbed it between his fingers. "I'm just making sure you trust me to…*instruct* you on what to do when we get inside tonight."

Fuck. When he put it like that, I had no trouble wearing his damn blindfold. But it was still a head trip to know that he was Lachlan, and yet I was looking right at him and seeing someone completely different.

It also made me feel like a total horn dog that within the space of a week I'd been physically attracted to three different men. Sure, Lachlan wasn't *actually* two different people, but that didn't account for my late night encounter with the masked stranger.

This city had my mind spinning.

“Cooper?”

I blinked Lachlan back into focus and looked at the intricate tattoo that had been applied to his neck. I knew it was temporary, but something about the way the tiger’s tail disappeared under the collar of his black shirt made me want to pet it—or lick it.

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked you if you’re ready for this. If you remember our roles for the night.”

Not really. That’s what I wanted to say. Was anyone ever *truly* ready to come face to face with the man who was responsible for their friend’s death? But that was why I was here. That was why I’d been in that alley that night. *That* was why I’d been chasing this story down, and if this Mick guy was whom I needed to get close to, then I would do whatever it took.

Even if that meant acting the submissive to Lachlan’s dom.

“Yes, sir.”

Lachlan chuckled, and the sound was so decadent that warmth flooded my body. “I like that a little more than I should, Blondie.”

I scrunched my nose up. “Blondie?”

Lachlan gestured to the wig Lucien’s woman had picked out for me. “Keeping it simple. It’s the best way to lie.”

“Good to know.”

The driver made a turn onto an all-too-familiar street, and as the building I’d spent way too many hours watching came into view, I ran my palms down my leather pants.

This was it. I was finally about to go inside.

“You ready?” Lachlan asked as our driver slowed the car and pulled up at the curb. I nodded, and he reached for the door. “Okay, let’s do this.”

I took in a deep breath and watched as Lachlan climbed out of the vehicle—which wasn’t a hardship at all with the way his tailored black pants pulled tight across his spectacular ass. But I didn’t have too long to focus on that, not when he was gesturing for me to follow. Something I would be doing for the rest of the night.

As I stepped out into the frigid January air, Lachlan moved in front of me and hooked a chain to the cuff on my wrist. I sucked in a sharp breath as his eyes found mine, the silent question in them my way out should I want it.

But I was in this now. There was no turning back.

So I did the one thing I knew would signal my willingness to go on: I lowered my eyes like any good submissive would.

A low gruff sound of approval left Lachlan as he turned away from me. He walked toward the bouncer, and I had no choice but to follow. When we reached the door, words were exchanged between Lachlan and the wall of muscle guarding it. True to his word, Lucien had somehow gotten us a pass.

The behemoth stepped aside and I quickly lowered my gaze to avoid his, and when I felt a tug at my wrist, I hurried forward. The last thing I wanted was to trip and fall at Lachlan's feet. Although I guess that wouldn't be all that odd in this particular circle.

As we stepped inside out of the cold, the heavy door was pushed shut behind me and we were transported to a place full of sex and sin. A place where the lights were as low as the bass pounding out of the speakers. A place where body heat was preferred, and money could buy you whatever pleasure you were seeking.

I was a complete fish out of water, and as the reality of what I was here to do sank in, so did the nerves.

"Stop fidgeting."

"Huh?"

Lachlan slapped at the hands I hadn't realized I was wringing, then moved in beside me and gripped the back of my neck.

"I think you mean, 'yes, sir,'" he said as he lowered his head and put his lips by my ear. "And I said, *stop* fidgeting."

"Yes, sir."

He tightened his grip, holding me exactly where he wanted me as his warm breath ghosted over my cheek.

"Whatever I tell you to do in here, you do it. Understand? These men are dangerous. If you want to survive, you need to play your part. Stop thinking. Let me do it for you. "

I turned my head a fraction, and when Lachlan didn't move, it took all I had not to rear back. His mouth was so close, his lips a mere whisper from mine.

"This is for your story, remember? For your friend."

Before I could respond, he jerked me forward and took my lower lip between his teeth. He sucked it into his mouth, his eyes locked on mine, and

despite the way my pulse jumped and my dick began to throb, I didn't move.

I knew exactly what he was doing—he was testing me. I wasn't about to fail. I stood still as a statue and didn't dare touch my "master" as he growled deep and let my lip go.

"That's more like it," he said, as I licked the lip he'd just sucked. Before I lowered my eyes, I saw his narrow. "Let's go. I need a hard…drink."

Lachlan guided me out of the entrance and through the crowd of gyrating bodies. It was clear that some were there to dance, but it seemed that for most it was just foreplay to what was going on beyond the floor.

It was difficult to get a really good look with my eyes lowered, but as we passed by several tables I caught sight of heads bent over white lines, pills swapping hands, and mouths open and sucking on things that had nothing to do with drinking, and everything to do with coming.

Wow… I'd had no idea. No idea that places like this actually existed. What had Lachlan called me? Naïve. I was starting to think he was right, because in all the time I'd stood outside watching people come and go from this place, I'd never expected it to be so…*in your face.*

I was about as far removed from Colorado as I could be right now, and that was saying something, considering I'd almost died in an alleyway recently.

But who *were* these people?

I was so caught up in my thoughts and trying to look around that I didn't notice someone step directly into my path until Lachlan drew me to a complete stop.

My feet immediately froze, but I kept my head lowered and focused on the expensive leather shoes that were much closer than Lachlan would probably like.

"Haven't seen you two around before." The man's thick accent implied he was definitely a local.

Lachlan moved in so close behind me I could feel the warmth of his torso through my black sheath top. "'Cause we haven't been around," he said as I did my best to become invisible. "I'm new in town, heard about this place from a friend, and thought I'd bring Blondie here out for a little fun."

"A friend, huh?" The suspicion in the other man's voice was almost as thick as the horrible cologne wafting off him. But in true Lachlan fashion,

he didn’t let anyone intimidate him.

“That’s right. Lucien Vale.” Lachlan said his friend’s name like it alone should impress the guy—and it seemed Lucien’s reputation was, in fact, impressive.

“I know Lucien.”

“Most do.”

“So why aren’t you at *his* place?”

“Because I’m looking for someone, and I was told he was here.”

I didn’t dare breathe at the interrogation, knowing we must’ve caught someone’s eye to have this guy stop and question us. But Lachlan didn’t seemed bothered.

“I thought you said you were here to have fun with Blondie. But if you’re looking for a good time with someone else, I’d be happy to take him off your hands.”

A meaty hand with a gold ring on the pinkie reached for the chain at my wrist, and just as he was about to take hold of it, Lachlan grabbed his arm, twisting it at an ungodly angle and making the other man curse.

Several people around us stopped to look our way as Lachlan stepped forward and said, “You ever try to touch what’s mine again, I’ll break this, and then your neck. Got it?”

A shiver raced through me at the deadly promise, and I had a sudden flash of my vigilante as Lachlan dropped the guy’s arm and came back to lay claim to me.

The warmth of his hand at the back of my neck both calmed and excited me, and I wasn’t sure which was more alarming.

“Now,” Lachlan said, “I *really* need a stiff drink.”

He directed me toward the bar and signaled the bartender, then hooked a finger under my chin, angling my face up toward his.

“You did good back there, Blondie. Made me proud.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the tone of his voice or the intense way he was staring at me, but the praise made my heart skip several beats. It was odd considering I was looking into a face I hadn’t known until hours ago. But even though the color of his eyes and hair were different, I could still see Lachlan. The man I’d met in the coffee shop. The one I’d felt an instant chemistry with and still did.

“I’m glad…sir.”

A pleased rumble left Lachlan's throat as he did a scan of our surroundings before turning back in time to greet the bartender.

"Evening," the young woman said. "What can I get for you?"

"Bourbon neat, top shelf for me, and he'll have a Shirley Temple."

What the fuck? A Shirley Temple? I hadn't had one of those since I was ten.

"You got it." She poured Lachlan's and had mine mixed and across the counter in moments. "Can I get you anything else?"

Lachlan pulled a black credit card from his wallet and held it between his fingers in front of her, much like he had me with his business card.

"How about some of that Rapture that's going around?"

"Sorry, never heard of it."

"You've never heard of it, or you don't sell it from where you stand behind that bar?"

She shrugged. "Can I get you anything else?"

If Lachlan was disappointed, he didn't show it. Instead he went straight for the kill shot.

"A sit-down with Mick."

Her hand froze on the card, and from beneath my lashes I saw her entire body stiffen. "I don't know who that is."

"See, now I think you know exactly who I'm talking about. Your eyes give you away. They keep drifting over my shoulder, left corner. It's dark back there. Darker than any other corner of the club."

"So? Maybe that's the owner."

"Or"—Lachlan leaned over the bar—"maybe it's the man who *owns* the owner. You asked me what I wanted. I want a sit-down with Mick."

"How do you know Mick?"

"Vince," he said, throwing out the name Lucien had given him. "He told one of my buddies that Mick sells the top product in the city. That's what I want. But if that's not true, I can take my money elsewhere."

It felt like minutes, hours, passed until she finally spoke again. "I don't have that kind of pull. To get you a sit-down."

"Then find me someone who does," Lachlan said as he let go of the card, and she hurried off. "Here. Drink this."

Lachlan slid my drink over to me, then shocked the hell out of me by pressing his lips to my temple.

“You did great,” he said by my ear. “You were calm, believable, and did as you were told.”

I dared turn my head a fraction, and when he winked at me, I almost melted at his feet.

“Gotta say, Blondie, I could get used to this.”

I wanted so badly to roll my eyes, but not about to risk being the one to mess shit up, I took a sip of my drink instead. “Do you think she’ll be back?”

“Definitely.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because if I was Mick and someone came into my place asking for me by name, I’d want to know who that was. I’d want to look him in the eye.”

That made sense, but I still had my doubts. What if she’d been telling the truth and really didn’t have any pull with Mick?

“We’ve got incoming,” Lachlan said, straightening beside me. “Remember, all you’ve got to do is keep quiet and—”

“Do what I’m told.”

“Exactly.” He downed his drink in one gulp. “Things are about to get real interesting.”

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LACHLAN

I WAS IMPRESSED.

Cooper was already playing his part beautifully, and any doubt I'd had over whether he could handle being in this situation vanished.

Almost.

We still had to meet Mick, and I knew just how volatile emotions could get when you came face to face with a man who'd played a part in killing someone you cared about.

But Cooper could do it. He *would* do it. From the little I knew about the situation, this seemed too important to him to get this far and fuck it up.

"You Clay?" The brusque voice belonged to a massive guy, several inches taller than me and about twice as wide. Not surprising they'd sent a bodyguard type as an escort.

I pushed my empty glass across the bar and turned to face him. "I am."

"Have anything on you?"

It was all I could do not to react to that. I didn't need anything but my bare fucking hands.

So I held them up, letting him pat me down without argument as he searched me for wires and weapons. When I was cleared, he turned his attention to Cooper, and I tugged on the chain to draw him forward.

"Eyes on me," I said, and he looked up and held my stare as the guard checked him over. He showed no fear, just determination, and when the guard finished his pat-down, I winked at Cooper. When he wasn't asking a million questions, he could follow an order.

We followed the guard to the VIP section, and as we drew close, the eyes of every one of the men and women occupying the couches turned in our direction. One of them included the man whose arm had to still be stinging after our confrontation, because he was shooting daggers my way.

In the center, a thin man sat cutting rows of white powder on the glass. I took a snapshot of him in my mind, committing his face to memory. Black hair slicked back and long enough that it curled up at the collar. A hooked nose that could've been genetic but also could've been the result of too many drugs and punches to the face. Dark grey suit that screamed money—drug money.

He only gave us a cursory glance before going back to what he was doing. "Who the hell are you?"

"You Mick?" I said.

Getting a question to his question had him scoffing. "Yeah. And who the fuck are you?"

"Clay Alexander. We've got a mutual acquaintance—"

"Yeah, yeah, Vince. I heard. Doesn't tell me what the fuck you want."

"I want some of that Rapture of yours."

He looked back up at me, this time with narrowed eyes. "Do you now?"

"Yeah. I do."

Curiosity flashed across his face, and just like that, I had him.

"Have a seat, Clay." He gestured toward the end of one of the couches, and the women sitting there hopped up immediately.

I took a seat and gave a slight tug on the chain tying Cooper to me. "On your knees," I instructed him.

He complied, kneeling at my feet, keeping his gaze averted. I gripped him by the back of the neck and gave him a squeeze that appeared controlling but was meant to reassure him.

Or maybe I just wanted to touch him.

Mick watched us and snapped his fingers, signaling one of the women whose spot I'd taken. The dress she wore barely covered her, and it rode up even farther as she perched on his lap. He ran a hand up her thigh possessively, like he needed a plaything to counteract mine.

Two minutes in and I had him clocked. Egotistical narcissist on a power trip—that was Mick. But really he was nothing more than a pathetic piece of shit who wouldn't be at the top of his trash heap long.

"What'd you say your name was?"

“Clay Alexander.” He wasn’t asking because he’d forgotten—he was too switched on for that. He was asking to see if I was lying. That was the way someone like him lived, always wondering if the person sitting opposite him was trying to take him down.

And I was, just not through legal means.

“That’s right, and who sent you again?”

“Vince. We done with the double checking? Or you want to run a fucking DNA test? I’m here to buy product. If you aren’t selling, then I’m done wasting my time.”

As I moved to stand, Mick held up a hand. “No need to be so hasty. I thought you were here to show your plaything a good time.”

My eyes cut to the fucker I’d told that story to and found his attention locked on Cooper where he remained kneeling at my feet.

“I don’t need to be here to do that. So if we’re done—”

“Sit down.”

My jaw clenched at Mick’s order, and several of his minions braced themselves, hands moving to their hips. They were itching for a fight, but with Cooper in the mix, they weren’t going to get it from me. I was not putting him in the middle of another gunfight. Especially not when I was unarmed.

“I don’t take orders. Not from you, not from any-fucking-body.”

“Then why don’t you look at it as an invitation?” Mick leaned back on the couch and spread his arm along the back. “Sit down, relax, and we’ll chat.”

I took another scan of the roped-off section we were in, making a mental note of all in our vicinity in case someone tried to get the jump on me, then retook my seat.

“Fine, let’s chat.” I ran a hand over the back of Cooper’s hair and rested it on his shoulder.

“You said you want some of that Rapture. What are we talking here? You want to sell or you want to score?”

“Why not both?”

Mick scoffed and looked to one of the guys fondling the gun at his hip. “You hear this guy? Why not both. Like he’s the one making the rules.”

I shrugged. “You asked. I heard it’s the new party drug on the scene. I want in.”

“I don’t need another seller.”

“Yes you do.” It was a bold move I was about to make, but I had some inside information that I knew Mick would salivate over. “You’ve heard of Lucien Vale, I assume?”

The question was irrelevant, of course, because everyone in the adult entertainment industry knew of Lucien. As the public owner of The Veil—New York’s most exclusive sex club—he had a reputation that reached all corners of the city, from the elite to the underbelly.

“What’s he got to do with this?”

“What if I told you I could get your product into his club?” If that wasn’t the biggest fucking dangling carrot, I didn’t know what was.

“I’d say you’re full of shit.”

“But you’d also be wondering…what if he isn’t?”

Mick sat up and shoved the woman off his lap, and as she squealed and stumbled onto the couch beside him, I did my best to pretend not to notice.

“How do you know Lucien?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does if you want to convince me you can get shit past his doors.”

We’d prepared for this moment, Lucien and I, trying to come up with a believable story of how I knew him if Mick asked. With my role tonight as a dom, there’d been a pretty logical solution, as long as I could get it out of my mouth without gagging on it.

“He trained me.” *God, if Lucien could hear me now, he’d be rolling around on the floor*. “Taught me this way of life and how to be a dom.”

“And you’re going to just betray him?”

“How is it betraying him? You don’t think he’s moving stuff through his club? Come on.” I shook my head. “But he keeps that shit in house. He’s not going to bring me in. I need some extra cash, fast.”

Mick rubbed his chin, the wheels turning behind those cunning eyes.

“Think of it,” I said, knowing he was right there. All he needed was a little more incentive. “Your product, in the hands of the Upper East Side, the rich, the famous…? I bet I can double—hell, *triple* your monthly income. Just give me a chance.”

Mick looked to the guy who’d stopped me and Cooper on our way in and gave a clipped nod. He disappeared behind one of the thick curtains, and seconds later reappeared with a silver tray. He placed it on the table between the couches at Cooper’s eye level, and when the lines of fresh powder came into view, Cooper’s entire body stiffened.

I squeezed his shoulder, doing my best to relay that everything was going to be okay. But that was little comfort, I was sure.

“This isn’t Rapture.” I knew that because the drugs I’d seen going around were pills in a packet. Not powder.

“No, it isn’t. We’re waiting on a new shipment of that. This is some of the finest coke money can buy. I told you we were going to sit, relax, and chat.” Mick picked up the rolled hundred-dollar bill he’d tossed on the table earlier, then leaned over the tray and snorted one of the lines. As he sucked it back, he tossed the bill toward me and gestured to the tray. “This is the *relax* portion of our little meeting. Try the goods, Clay.”

“I think I’ll just—”

“Try a full line or the deal is off.” Mick fell back on his seat. “You don’t insult your host by turning down his product. In fact, why not start with your plaything? Let him join the party.”

Cooper tensed under my hand, and I remembered the vehement way he’d denied ever taking, or *wanting* to take, drugs. It was a firm no, and I wouldn’t let this fucker force him.

I racked my brain to think of a way out of this for him without completely ruining the deal, but the only thing I could come up with made me wonder if I’d lost my damn mind. Then again, if Cooper didn’t want to go through with it, he had a safe word.

“Thanks for the offer,” I said, and leaned back into the couch, spreading my legs wide. “But he’s going to be busy blowing something else while *I* enjoy your product.”

Cooper’s head whipped in my direction, and it was the first time he’d broken character. Not that I could blame him. I’d just announced he was going to give me a blow job in front of everyone, and we hadn’t exactly discussed that prior to right now.

“I see.” Mick chuckled, as Cooper’s wide eyes found mine. “You’re a man who likes to indulge.”

I took Cooper’s chin in hand and brushed my thumb over his lips. “I am, and fucking this sweet mouth while high will be one hell of an indulgence. *Euphoric*, even…”

At the sound of his safe word, Cooper blinked, the message clear that if he wanted this to end, all he had to do was say it. But no words came out. All he did was lick his lips, and my dick saw that as game time.

He was in. He was going to do it.

“Undo my pants,” I said, needing to get his eyes off mine and focused elsewhere, otherwise I was going to come before I secured this deal.

Cooper shifted between my spread thighs, then reached for my belt and unbuckled it.

“Here.” Mick slid the tray across the table before falling back into his seat, his eyes a little glassier now.

I looked down at where Cooper was lowering my zipper and put my hand over his, rubbing it up and down my hard-on. Cooper raised his head, looking for my next direction, and while I thought I’d see disgust or even anger, I noted a flush to his cheeks.

“Get me the tray,” I said, and watched as he turned to pick it up and hold it in front of me. I picked up the rolled bill, leaned over it, and snorted the line of powder up in one go.

Fucking *hell* that shit was potent, and the second it hit, my eyes began to water.

Cooper swallowed as I tossed the bill down, and as he placed the tray back on the table, I reached inside my pants and pulled my cock free. “Suck it.”

Jesus.

I couldn’t believe this was how the night would end, but as Cooper wrapped his hand around my stiff shaft and lowered his head, my hips involuntarily jacked up off the couch.

“Good shit, isn’t it?” The woman Mick had tossed off his lap earlier now had her hand down his pants and her mouth at his neck.

Seemed he liked my idea of indulging.

“Definitely,” I managed as Cooper flicked his tongue over the head of my cock. Was he tasting me? No, he was just acting his part.

“Rapture is even better. Would make you fuck that little plaything of yours till he couldn’t walk anymore.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. There’s a shipment coming in next week. I’ll call you when it gets here.”

I reached down and gripped Cooper’s chin. “Would you like that, Blondie? We could try it together.”

My sight blurred a little as I blinked, trying to bring Cooper’s face into focus. But it was no use—my brain was firing off all kinds of signals that

had nothing to do with common sense and everything to do with getting my dick in his mouth.

"We'll take it," I told Mick before I lost all train of thought, then I reached for the back of Cooper's neck and pulled him down over my lap, where he swallowed my cock in one move.

Fuck. Me.

It was like heaven and hell all rolled into one, the feel of his lips around me an exquisite kind of torture that was being contaminated by the drugs running rampant in my system.

But there was nothing I could do about it now, so I closed my eyes and reveled in the feelings flooding my body. All I could hope for was that by the end of this, we both ended up getting what we came for.

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COOPER

THE DOOR TO the car slammed shut, and just like that, Lachlan and I were alone again. Only this time, he wasn't giving me directives on how to suck his dick, not when he couldn't sit still and stop fidgeting. My how the tables had turned.

He was trying hard to hide it, but every so often he'd ball his hands up tight before flexing them wide and shifting restlessly in his seat. Then his thumb would brush over the finger he usually had a ring on, and when he realized it wasn't there, he would reach up to run his hand over his hair. But the second he touched the short black wig, he'd drop his arm and sigh.

Over and over again, on repeat.

Fucking drugs.

I wanted to lean over and comfort him somehow, but I was in a state of my own making right then. There was no need for the high Mick's shit had given Lachlan, because I still had the taste of Lachlan's cum on my tongue. And *that* fueled the raging hard-on that had made it difficult to walk out of the club.

Hell, just sitting here was pain on a whole other level. My cock ached for release, and had I not been playing the part of obedient submissive on my knees in front of a table full of people, I would've said fuck having my dom's permission and creamed my pants right there. With Lachlan's incredible dick in my mouth.

Fuuuuck. No. He wasn't my dom. I wasn't his plaything. We'd only been acting our parts, and now the jig was up.

I kept my hands in my lap, pressing down hard against my erection as if that could shut it off.

God, he'd played his part well, though. If I didn't know better, I'd think Lachlan *was* a bossy dom who orchestrated drug hauls on the side.

And directed his sub to his knees to blow him…

"Are you okay?" There was a rough edge to Lachlan's voice that had me jerking my head in his direction.

"Am *I* okay? Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

He rubbed his ringless finger absently. "I'm fine."

Maybe so, but the situation was far from it. Something could've happened to him, and I didn't even want to think about that.

"That was risky as hell, you know," I said. "What if Mick's shit was tainted?"

"It wasn't."

"But it could've been."

"But it wasn't." He ran a finger along his lower lip as he gazed out the window. "I…apologize. For making you do what you did."

His words hung heavy in the air between us, and it took me a second to realize what he was apologizing for.

It wasn't often I was rendered speechless, but what did I say to a man who thought he should apologize for letting me suck his cock? That didn't warrant an apology, not when I would've begged to get a taste of him all the way back at the coffee shop.

"Uh…" I cleared my throat and tried again. "You didn't *make* me to do anything."

"I did. It was my idea."

"And I didn't say the safe word."

"No," he mused, and finally met my eyes. "You didn't."

Tension sparked between us in the dark, so many things I wanted to say —or *do*—but then Lachlan sniffed and wiped at his nose a couple of times.

Now wasn't the time for any of that, not when he was high.

Fuck Mick. Fuck every single one of those assholes who'd played a part in killing Alex and countless others. I was grateful Lachlan had figured out a way for me to keep my head down and not look them in the eye, because doing so would've blown our cover. There was no way I'd be able to hide my rage.

He fingered the buttons of his shirt that started halfway down his chest and sighed. “I just didn’t want you to have to do that shit. Not with what it did to your friend.”

Silence stretched between us, and the longer it went on, the more my ears began to ring.

Was I understanding him correctly or had I gone crazy? Because it sure sounded like he’d given me an out so I wouldn’t have to partake in the drugs with the rest of them. Like he was protecting me in some sweet, very fucked-up plan.

It sounded like he’d been choosing between two evils in that moment and gone with the lesser one. That was just proof he was high and not thinking clearly, because there was nothing wrong with a blow job. There was especially nothing wrong with my being the one to give it, and if Lachlan had been in his right mind, he would’ve seen that clear as day between my thighs.

With the heel of my hand, I pressed down on my dick, willing my erection to go away until I had a private moment to get myself off.

“I can take care of that.” Lachlan watched me with hooded eyes, and then dropped them to my lap.

Desire, hot and fierce, shot through me. It was one thing to be sitting here thinking about sliding my mouth up and down his cock; it was another thing to imagine he’d want to do that.

To me.

Right here, right now.

Hell, even just his hand wrapped around me—

I squeezed my eyes shut and increased the pressure until it hurt.

Think of something else. Anything else. Fuck, think of Mick.

I couldn’t take advantage of what Lachlan was offering, not when he was so messed up. He didn’t know what he was saying.

“You don’t have to sit there in pain.” Lachlan took my wrist and tugged it away from what I’d been trying, and failing, to conceal.

God, it was tempting. He had no idea how hard it was not to take advantage and beg him to touch me. But all I could see when I looked at him was the role he was playing, and I just couldn’t do it. No matter how much I’d want to kick my ass tomorrow. I already barely recognized myself —a masked lover, blowing Lachlan in a sex club full of drug dealers. If I

didn’t deny what I wanted in this moment, I’d secure my spot as completely, irrevocably fucked up.

“I’m fine,” I bit out, harsher than I wanted it to be, but I was trying.

Lachlan let go of my wrist. “Suit yourself.”

When he turned to gaze out the window again, I bit down hard on my lip to avoid begging him to do it. To unbutton these torturous leather pants and suck me so hard and deep I’d never have to come again.

You’re an idiot. Such a fucking idiot.

A few minutes later, like he’d forgotten and it just occurred to him, Lachlan tied the blindfold over my eyes, and I let the annoyance from not knowing where we were fuel me enough that my dick stopped trying to stab through my pants. *That* would’ve been more awkward to walk around with than it had been to swallow Lachlan’s cock in front of a bunch of strangers.

Who was I again? And why was it all so *hot*? Even Lachlan eye-fucking me when he snorted a line was seared into my brain.

With his grip firm on my arm, he led me through wherever we were, into the elevator, up however many floors, before depositing me in the penthouse and untying the blindfold.

“We’re here.”

“So I see…finally.”

“What’d you say?” Lachlan asked as I walked over to my backpack. I needed to get out of this outfit as soon as possible.

“I said *finally*. The blindfold, remember?”

“Oh, right.” Lachlan’s eyes twitched as he stared me down, then he turned away, rubbing the back of his neck. He had to be feeling like shit. Not that I would know, but he definitely didn't *seem* like himself.

“Listen, you don’t have to stay up here. I’m just going to go shower and clean up after—”

“I defiled you.”

“What?” My jaw fell on the floor as I stormed over to him. I grabbed hold of his arm and jerked him around, and the fact he let me spoke volumes. “You did not *defile* me. I did what I did tonight of my own accord. I did it because—”

“Of your story.”

That was one reason, but not what I’d been about to say. The reality was I’d wanted to taste him, wanted to put my mouth on him, and the fact he was too goddamn high to know that had me even more frustrated.

“Forget it,” I said, and let go of his arm, snatching up my bag and marching toward the bathroom. “And you can leave. I promise I’m not going to drown in my tears over what you did.”

Was I being snarky? Yes.

Did I care? No.

I was irritable as hell and had a raging hard-on for a man who was treating me like he’d stolen my virtue and now regretted every second of it.

God, was there anything more frustrating? Especially when all I really wanted was for him to pull that stupid wig off, take out those horrible blue contacts, and come join me in the shower.

I slammed the door shut and leaned against it, staring at my reflection in the mirror, and barely recognized the person I saw.

The blond hair had to go, and so did these clothes. Maybe when I was finally free of them I’d feel more like myself. I dropped the bag, peeling the wig off first and then the prosthetic nose and chin they’d added to change the proportions of my face. The contacts went next, then the horrible sheer top, and because I was punishing my stupid dick, I left the leathers for last.

I stepped under the warm water and reveled in the hard pressure of the spray as it hit my back, washing away the night’s activities. It wasn’t that I wanted to forget what I did with Lachlan, but more *where* it had happened and *why*.

If it had been after our coffee date or even a second meetup, I’d be memorizing every single second of it. But right now, I wanted to replace it all except the taste of him…the feel of him…and the sound he’d made when I first swallowed him between my lips.

Yes. That’s it…

Remember how his fingers felt in your hair.

How his cock throbbed on your tongue.

Remember the sexy way he ordered you to “suck it.” Now put him in this shower with you.

I soaped up my dick, turned to face the spray, and then braced one hand on the wall. It wouldn’t take long to get myself off, but I was going to make it count.

Closing my eyes, I took myself back between Lachlan’s spread thighs and the hunger I felt when he revealed himself to me for the first time. Long, thick, and veiny, he’d already been hard, cum leaking from the tip, and instantly my mouth had watered.

Even now, as I gave myself several rough strokes, I could feel the way I'd traced the length of him with my tongue. How he'd uttered a breathy grunt every now and then even when he'd been trying not to.

Shit. What I wouldn't give to have stripped him naked, removed all the shit covering his gorgeous features, and had him in here with me.

My breath was coming out in pants now, my fist moving faster and faster. If I couldn't have Lachlan the way I wanted—or the way I wanted him to want *me*—then I'd pretend, right here, with the water washing away the evidence.

I came on a gasp, my cum spraying the walls with the force of it.

It was only when I finally stepped out of the shower and wrapped myself in a towel that I realized I hadn't thought about the masked man all day.

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LACHLAN

"ARE YOU GOING to stand in the doorway all day, or are you going to come in?"

King's voice did nothing to soothe the throbbing headache I'd woken up with as I squinted against the morning sun streaming through the window of his office.

To say I was feeling last night's activities would be an understatement. I tried to prop myself up and not look half as shitty as I felt. But it was an effort. My stomach felt as though it could take a turn at any second, especially coupled with the memories of what I'd made Cooper do.

I shoved off the doorframe and started across the wide expanse of the bossman's office, and about halfway across the hardwood I heard a tsking sound from one of the French settees.

There, lounging back with his feet kicked up on thousands of dollars' worth of furniture like he owned the place, was James "East" Easton. Otherwise known as *one* of our illustrious leaders' boyfriends.

Yes, *one* of.

King always had been a greedy bastard.

"Stone. Lachlan Stone—"

"I'm not James fucking Bond."

"I should've known you're who I have to thank for his bad mood the last couple of weeks," East continued as if I hadn't said a thing.

Pompous little shit.

“Says the guy whose fault it was he was in a *perpetual* bad mood for four years.”

“Excuse me, three and a half,” East said, sitting up and crossing one leg over the other. “The last part of that time frame I was making him very happy.”

“You and Zac.”

“That’s right—jealous?”

“Stop it,” King said, getting to his feet. “East? Don’t you have somewhere else to be right now?”

“Not really.”

“Then pretend you do.”

East let out a put-upon sigh and got to his feet, making sure to straighten his suit jacket.

It was still such a shock that King was in a committed relationship with not one, but two men. But the biggest surprise was that one of them had ended up being the self-proclaimed “leader” of the Park Avenue Princes—a name that still followed the group of Astor University grads around even after they’d gone off into the real world.

It was kind of fitting, I supposed, since they’d merely been playing in our kingdom.

East strolled toward me as though he didn’t have a care in the world—including King’s order. But deep down we both knew if there was one person he obeyed, it was Tyrone Kingston.

East understood what he had, and despite his arrogant ways, he always respected Libertine’s hierarchy. In this instance he wasn’t a boyfriend, he was a member—and what was about to be said in this room was King’s business.

“I’m going.” East stopped looked me dead in the eye, which was impressive, considering he knew just how lethal I was with my bare hands. “Good luck,” he said before exiting the office, his smug expression telling me I was going to need it.

“Tell me something, Lachlan,” King said. “Are you going out of your way to think up new ways to piss me off?”

So it seemed that word of last night’s little reconnaissance mission had found its way in house, and I wasn’t *that* surprised, considering nothing went on in this city without King’s knowing about it.

It was a little alarming how quickly he'd found out, though. Lucien wouldn't have told him, too worried about his own ass, so how *did* King find out?

Not that it mattered. He knew, which meant I was fucked. And as he was giving me this dressing-down in private, it wasn't going to be the verbal slap-down I'd gotten away with the last couple of times.

"Nothing to say?" he said.

"Nothing you're going to like," I admitted, because while I might not tell King about my plans or ideas ahead of time, I'd never lie about them if asked point-blank.

"Then why don't we start with, are you okay?"

I narrowed my eyes, the question so far from left field that I was caught off guard.

"You look like shit," King continued, running his eyes over my crumpled pants and untucked shirt, and I couldn't argue with him. I remembered pulling off my wig last night, and somehow removing my contacts, but everything else remained. "And the security feed shows you were twitchy as hell when you returned from your little outing with your journalist friend, so I'm going to ask you again. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Good." King stood and came around his desk. "Then do you want to tell me what you think you're doing walking into a drug dealer's club without any backup or telling anyone?"

"I got a lead on Mick's whereabouts and thought I'd check it out."

"A lead?"

"Yes."

"From this journalist friend of yours."

"That's right."

"And instead of bringing that lead to me and discussing it with the rest of us, you decided to go off on your own?"

"I wasn't on my own."

"Don't split hairs with me. That man doesn't have a clue what kind of danger you walked him into—"

"Yes, he does."

"Does he now?" King said.

"Yes."

"Explain."

“He was in the alley that night. He almost died trying to get information on who is dealing this Rapture shit. You think he’s going to stop just because we lock him up for a few days?”

“If he has any sense of self-preservation.”

I snorted, thinking about the way Cooper had opened his window to a complete stranger—a masked one at that.

“He’s too curious to stop now,” I said, thinking of the million and one questions Cooper had asked of me. “And that key card he found only made him more so.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“I said, *why* is he so curious? Why is he getting involved with something so dangerous, Lachlan? There has to be a reason.”

“There is, but it’s not my place to tell it.”

King arched a brow. “Not your place? I’m asking you to tell me why I should let a journalist remain within these walls, and why you keep risking your neck for him, and all I get from you is, *it’s not your place*?”

I shrugged, knowing nothing I was going to say would appease King. He wanted answers, and I had none to give him.

“You disobeyed a direct order taking him out of here.”

“No, you told me to keep an eye on him at all times.”

King opened his mouth to disagree but then stopped. “I fucking hate it when you do that.”

“I know. But you know if there’s a loophole—”

“You’ll find it.” King sighed and turned away from me. “One of the reasons you’re such a good asset.”

“He has information, King. Good information. He led me right to the club and inside, and because of him I now have an in with Mick.”

King turned back to face me, his annoyance now replaced with interest. “Keep going.”

“I made contact and managed to convince him to let me move some of his product.”

“Now *that* I like to hear.”

“I told you.”

“This isn’t me congratulating you.”

“But I wouldn’t have it without Cooper.” I ran a hand through my hair, and realized I desperately needed a shower. “He’s been tracking these guys

for weeks. Plus, that key card he has, it has to lead somewhere. That's why he's here. That's why I think we should pull him in."

"You've already pulled him in."

"More." I knew King would hate this next suggestion. Cooper had put his life on the line twice now to get information about Mick, and after last night, I figured this was the least I could do. "He's not interested in writing a story about where he is. Right now, he thinks he's at some fancy safe house because I'm in security."

"Well, that's good, at least."

"Exactly, so do we have to keep him locked up like he's in prison? God knows when we'll get Mick, and you can't very well keep him tucked away."

"Can't I?" King side-eyed me then headed back to his desk, his silence giving nothing away as to where his mind was at. "He can have temporary access. He can move about the upper floors—"

"That's not enough."

"Watch yourself, Lachlan. You're treading a thin line as it is. Your attitude isn't going to help your cause."

I clenched my teeth, knowing King was right. He was already allowing way more than I expected.

"The information he brought us was valuable. He wants to be part of the takedown, King."

"Absolutely not."

"He deserves a chance—"

"To what?" King slapped his palms on the desk and glared at me. "Get killed?"

"I won't let that happen. I've already proven that."

"But you can't *guarantee* it. He's a civilian. A reporter, which is even worse." King hung his head as though exhausted. "You're lucky I'm even letting him stay at the club. There's no way he's going downstairs. Especially not without being vetted—"

"Then *vet* him," I shouted a little louder than usual, but I couldn't seem to control the emotions running through me.

Cooper had turned his entire world upside to track down the man who was responsible for his friend's death, and now that he was close, we were going to snatch that away from him because he was getting underfoot?

How was that fucking fair?

“Alessio can have all the information you need in less than an hour, and you know it.”

King’s jaw bunched as his fingers all but drilled holes in the desktop. But then he raised eyes to mine and said, “Fine. But you better get him to sign a fucking NDA.”

“On it.”

“And Lachlan?” I turned back around to see King’s gaze drop to my neck. “Nice tattoo.”

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21

COOPER

AS I SAT at the ten-person dining table in the penthouse alone eating the most exquisite chicken, plated like it'd come from a five-star restaurant, it occurred to me how out of the norm all of this was.

Obviously I knew that, but sitting here with nothing but my thoughts had me wondering who Lachlan really was. What this place he'd taken me to really was. Because after last night, I no longer believed he was just the head of a security company. He was too connected, too confident, too smooth, as was his friend Lucien.

All of this was on a different level. Cost seemed to be no issue, nor did the unlimited resources that seemed to fall from the sky for these guys. So what was his story?

This was where I'd been firmly keeping my thoughts, because the alternative was to remember deep-throating Lachlan's cock, and I didn't need a hard-on all damn day.

I speared the chicken a little too hard, and my fork scraped against the plate.

I'm not thinking about blow jobs today. Not when it's clear he thinks I regretted it.

He'd been in one of the bedrooms near the front door when I got out of the shower, and I'd chosen one across the penthouse to give us both space.

Or maybe it was more like I was pouting that he hadn't been down for a round two, but it was also so I wouldn't be tempted to pop into his room in

the middle of the night. After all, I wasn't as bold as a certain masked man who snuck into mine.

But I wasn't thinking about him either. Definitely not wondering if he'd been by my place only to see I wasn't there.

The sound of the front door opening had me looking up mid-bite. Lachlan stepped inside, looking a lot less keyed up than he did last night. Self-assured. Cool. Insanely attractive…

"That's one of my favorites." He nodded at my plate as he slid out of his suit jacket, then hung it in the coat closet. He carried a tablet, and I was sure he somehow had the magical Wi-Fi that still wasn't available to me.

"I would've taken you for more of a wagyu fan. Or maybe the poached lobster with truffle butter sauce." I set my fork aside and wiped my mouth with the cloth napkin. "You know, when you mentioned room service, I was expecting more along the lines of burgers and sandwiches."

"If that's what you prefer, you can ask for a special request and they'll accommodate you."

"I don't think a place that doesn't list their prices on the menu would get a kick out of my turning down their fancy chicken."

Lachlan's lips twitched as he took a seat at the opposite end of the table. "Fancy chicken. I'll let them know to change the name."

"That," I said, pointing a finger in his direction. "What the hell does that mean? You'll 'let them know,' like you have any kind of pull there."

"I do."

"So, what, you own a restaurant too?"

"In a way."

"*And* you're the head of Stone Security?"

He spread his hands wide, looking entirely too comfortable in this setting. "I'm a man of many talents, what can I say?"

"A lot, actually. Starting with: who are you, *really*?"

Lachlan smirked. "Am I your story now?"

"No. I told you you'd be off the record. But you can't expect me to continue to trust you if you aren't who you say you are."

For a long moment, he watched me like he could see right through me. I waited for him to tell me it was none of my business, that he didn't owe me anything, not when he'd already done his part in helping me out of a bad situation.

Instead, Lachlan pushed his chair back and walked around to my end of the table. He tapped the tablet a few times and then set it down in front of me. “Since you want answers,” he said.

I pushed the tray of food aside and brought the tablet closer, and as I sped through the contents, I frowned.

“This is a nondisclosure agreement,” I said.

“It is.”

“So I sign this and I get to know what secrets you’re hiding, is that it?”

Lachlan sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms. “You have a lead on your drug story, and yet you’re still focused on me. Why is that?”

A flush of heat spread through my entire body at that question, and I hoped like hell it didn’t show on my face.

He was right, though. I was far too fascinated with him when I should’ve had all my attention on Mick, the one who started all this shit, who made my skin crawl and my rage intensify. It was the motivation I needed to get justice for Alex and to do my part in making sure no one else got killed.

It was a mess of my own making that I couldn’t help my attraction. It was the last thing I needed, but it wasn’t a switch I could just turn off. Lachlan was *right there*, even now, hovering over me.

“If you don’t want my focus, you could back up a little,” I said, shrugging and trying to come off unaffected by his presence. I continued to scroll through the document that seemed to be more ironclad than others I’d researched, but I could see Lachlan’s mouth quirk up out of the corner of my eye.

“I’m bothering you?”

“Yes,” I lied.

“Would you like me to move?”

Pointing it out only made me notice how good he smelled, fresh out of the shower, his hair still damp. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of letting him know just how badly my body still craved him even now.

“Do what you want,” I said, not even looking his way. As I reached the end of the document, I tapped the signature box, signed it, and handed Lachlan the tablet.

He reached for it, making sure his fingers brushed against mine before I let go.

“Thank you.”

His stare was so penetrating that I had to look away.

Jesus. And he wondered why I couldn’t help but focus on him.

I cleared my throat and sat as far back from him as my chair would allow. “Now what? We play twenty questions and you answer everything?”

“*Only* twenty questions?”

“To start with.”

“Ah, I see.”

“First question, where am I?”

“In one of the penthouses reserved for members of our private organization.”

I blinked, surprised he’d answered so freely. “What private organization?”

“One that’s private unless you’re a member.”

“And you’re a member?”

He arched a brow.

“Oh. You’re not just a member, are you? You’re high up in this organization.”

“Listen, do you want to sit in here all day and ask me questions? Or would you rather get out of this room, stretch your legs, and take a look around?”

He couldn’t have offered a more enticing distraction. I was actually going to see what was on the other side of the locked door?

Granted, it was the most luxurious cage I could have been locked inside of, but still, to finally know what was on the other side? *Without* a blindfold?

“So you’re really going to let me out of here?”

“Well, I can’t keep you locked up in here for the week.”

“A *week*?”

“Yes. That’s the time frame Mick gave for when we can expect the next shipment of drugs.”

“Yeah, but you don’t—”

“Think it’s safe for you to return to your apartment before that time? No, I don’t.”

“I guess I didn’t think of it like that. But you’re right.”

“I know.”

I smirked, immediately reminded of the first time I met him in the coffee shop.

“What?” Lachlan asked as I got to my feet.

“Nothing.”

Lachlan moved off the table until we were practically standing toe to toe, and I had to angle my face up to meet his eyes.

“That smirk didn’t look like nothing.”

“You have your secrets and I have mine. Now, are you going to show me around, or did you want to get back to the twenty questions?”

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed as they roamed down over me, and a shiver raced down my spine. We needed to get out of this room *now*. Between last night’s frustration and Lachlan back to his usual sexy, controlled mode, I couldn’t be held responsible for what might happen if we remained around flat surfaces.

He walked to the door and pulled it open, then turned back. “Well, come on. Let’s show you around.”

I hurried over, but before I could make it through the open door, he moved in front of it.

“I’m going to give you a tour of where you can go while you stay here, but—”

“Oh, here it comes.”

“What’s that?”

“The restrictions. I’m going to give you this, *but.*… Let me guess, I get to go to the restaurant my food came from but that’s it. You’re not really giving me anything at all, right?”

Lachlan cocked his head. “You know, this conversation is eerily similar to one I had recently with my boss.”

“You have a boss? I thought you were the head of your security company?”

“And I thought you were going to stop asking questions.” Lachlan’s breath ghosted over my lips.

“We haven’t left the room yet,” I said quietly.

“You’re right. We probably should do that.”

It took everything I had not to lean forward and try to convince him what a bad idea that was with my mouth, but considering I hadn’t been making the most rational decisions lately, I decided to let the head on my shoulders prevail this time.

Lachlan led me to the elevators, and once we stepped inside he didn't press any buttons.

It was the first time I'd gotten a look at what I'd felt was a claustrophobic space in a blindfold, but I should've known based on the penthouse that this wasn't just some run-of-the-mill elevator, but one that belonged in the Gilded Age.

"Where to first?" I said, noticing that the floors went up to eighteen and we were currently on the level directly below.

"That's up to you. Choose one."

Now this was my idea of fun. So many floors, so many decisions. I randomly reached out to hit the number five, but Lachlan stilled my hand.

"Not that one," he said.

"You said to choose one. What's wrong with five?"

"I think you'll enjoy the others more."

Now my curiosity was piqued. I'd definitely be back to figure out what the deal was there, but for the time being, I hit ten.

As the elevator began its descent, I said, "I'm guessing that floor meets your approval?"

"I think you'll find it useful."

"You're incredibly cryptic, anyone ever tell you that?"

"Not to my face."

I snorted out a laugh as the doors opened and we entered what seemed to be an entire floor dedicated to—

"Our business center," Lachlan confirmed, as if he'd reached into my mind and plucked out the thought. "As you've noticed, we don't permit the use of phones or computers for guests due to the sensitive nature of our business. However, during the rest of your stay, you're welcome to come here and work."

"Really?" I scanned over the many different workspace setups across the vast floor, some of which were currently occupied. "You'll actually set me loose in here without supervision?"

"Surprised?"

"Uh, yeah. Does that mean I can wander any of these floors without you, or just this one?"

"I'm showing you the parameters. You'll receive a key card that will prohibit you from reaching any floors that are off-limits." When we entered

the elevator and I hit another button, he added, “Plus, there’s always someone watching. Remember that.”

I heard the warning, but didn’t think twice about it, because I didn’t care to fuck up my stay here. Was I curious? Absolutely. Which was why I’d push Lachlan’s buttons to see how far I could go, but I didn’t actually plan to break any of his many rules.

The next few stops covered the restaurants and bars, the ballroom, and a fitness center that I had no doubt Lachlan spent hours in. More amenities on more floors than I could keep track of were available to the members of whatever this organization was. There was no way I’d remember what was where. I’d need a map.

There was, however, one stop we hadn’t made, and if he thought I’d forget about it, he was out of his mind.

I hit the button for the fifth floor before he could stop me, and he shook his head.

“What’s so bad you don’t want me to see it?” I asked.

“I never said *bad*.”

“Then why did you say not to go to this floor?”

Lachlan backed me up against the wall and forced my chin up with his finger. “Because I figured you’d gotten enough of sex clubs last night. Was I wrong?”

“So you really *do* have a sex club here?”

Lachlan nodded, and I swallowed against the sudden uptick of my pulse.

How sheltered had I been all these years that sex clubs seemed to be the norm for New York society? Was there one on every corner I didn’t know about?

I was entirely out of my element, and yet I was curious. Intrigued, even.

“I want to see,” I said.

“And participate?”

“I didn’t say that.” *But I’m thinking it now…*

The elevator doors opened, and Lachlan stepped back. He held my eyes as he gestured for me to step out first.

It wasn’t like stepping out into some big group orgy. There was a small entryway with two doors—one red and one black. No other signage existed.

“What do these mean?”

“What do you think they mean?”

“One’s for men, one’s for women?”

He shook his head.

“Uh…one leads to sex, one leads to eternal damnation?”

“Your mind is an interesting place to be, isn’t it?” Lachlan mused. He strolled forward and waited for me to make a choice. “Do you want it mild…or wild?”

My eyes widened slightly. “I didn’t know a sex club could be mild.”

“Comparatively.”

“Okay…why don’t we start there, then? So I can see what *mild* entails for you.”

Lachlan smirked and headed toward the red door, and once we were past that barrier, I understood what he meant by “comparatively.”

People were fucking…*everywhere*. Even through the red haze that permeated the space, I could see that, and it was so shocking, and so much hotter than anything at the club last night, that I couldn’t make my feet move. I just stood there, taking it all in, wondering how I’d ended up in a city where every desire you had was laid out at your feet.

Beside me, Lachlan chuckled. “All right, Bambi, let’s go.”

That shook me out of my stupor. “Bambi?”

“You look like a deer caught in headlights.”

“No, I’m just…taking it all in.” That was an understatement. My eyes caught on the two men closest to us who weren’t paying any mind to anyone as they fucked against a wall. “So, do *you* come here?” I finally said, dragging my eyes off all the naked bodies in different stages of sexual acts.

“Well, that is the point when you’re here—to come.”

That probably hadn’t been the smartest thing for me to ask, because now visions of last night, Lachlan’s cock, and my sucking him to an intense orgasm flashed through my mind. My dick started to throb, and suddenly all I could think about was his offer to repay the favor.

“That isn’t a no,” I said.

“No, it is not.”

Oh *fuck*, why was that so hot?

I shouldn’t be getting turned on by the idea of Lachlan in here fucking someone else. But what else was new? It seemed New York was bringing

out a side of me I’d never known existed.

“Tell me, Cooper, what are you thinking about right now?”

Was I brave enough to really tell him? I could end this now, tell him nothing and be on my way.

But the intensity of his stare had me rewinding to when I’d been kneeling between his thighs.

“I was thinking about you…coming. Down my throat last night.”

Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I reached for the back of his neck and closed the couple of inches separating us.

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COOPER

I'D SAID THAT. And I would probably kick my ass over this later if things went south.

But if Lachlan was surprised by my kiss, he didn't show it. His mouth parted immediately, like he'd been expecting it. Like he knew my self-restraint only extended so far, and it had finally snapped.

Maybe his had too. Or maybe it was being in a sex club, surrounded by people fucking without inhibition, that spurred us on.

I didn't even care about the reason, because Lachlan's mouth was hot and hungry, taking control of mine. Strong hands met my waist, and my back hit the wall.

I cursed, not from the jolt, but from how fucking *good* he tasted. His tongue swept inside my mouth, as insistent as his wandering hands. Adrenaline was riding me, and the urge to get Lachlan naked, to see that stunning body in its entirety, was my sole focus.

Sliding my hands down from his neck, I could feel every hardened ridge of him, and I slipped his belt loop free and went to reach for the button of his pants, but his hand stilled mine.

"Not here," he said roughly against my mouth.

"Why *not* here?" After all, everyone else was. They wouldn't even notice us, and it didn't seem like Lachlan was a virgin to this place.

He growled against my throat as I tried to unzip his pants. Normally, a response like that would've made me hesitate, but I could feel the evidence of his arousal, even as he tried to fight it.

“Fuck me, Lachlan,” I said, my voice coming out far too breathy, but it had his cock jerking against my hand. “You know you want to. *I* want you to—”

A feral sound came out of him as he ripped me off the wall, and the next thing I knew, he hauled me up over his shoulder like I weighed nothing.

And just when I thought that meant he was about to take me deeper into the sex club, he grabbed a handful of packets from a vase and burst through the door we’d come through, back out to the elevator.

“What the—? What are you doing?”

Lachlan didn’t answer as he stepped inside. Disorientation kicked in, as going from the red haze of the sex club to the harsh, bright lights of reality made my head spin. Or maybe that was from the fact I was still hanging upside down over his shoulder, which, unfortunately, didn’t do anything to quell my erection.

It *did*, however, give me a view of Lachlan’s ass.

So I reached for it. Grabbed the tight, round muscle of his ass, kneaded it with my palm.

Lachlan’s hand slammed against the button for the penthouse. “Cooper…”

It sounded like a warning, one I didn’t care to heed. In fact, it seemed Lachlan’s own self-restraint was close to snapping, and that was so sexy I slipped a finger into the waistband of his pants to tease the crack of his ass.

Another strained curse left his lips, and then his hold on me tightened to the point of pain. That only spurred me on, and I wondered what he’d do if I added more fingers and went a little deeper.

I didn’t get to find out.

Because the second the doors opened, Lachlan shot out of it, and I had to remove my hand and hold on to his belt to keep from bouncing off.

But the man was in a hurry, and thank God for that.

At least, I *hoped* that was a good thing. A small part of me wondered if he’d gotten me out of there because he had no interest and just wanted me to stop. There was no way I was imagining the sexual tension between us, though. It had been there since the day we met in the coffee shop and was unavoidable now.

If it turned out Lachlan had changed his mind, that he didn’t want me in the same way, I’d leave him alone. Keep my hands and my dirty thoughts to myself.

I just didn’t think that was the case. Not when the door to the penthouse opened and one of the packets he’d grabbed fell out of his pocket—a condom.

“Fuck,” I said, my cock throbbing at the sight.

“Yeah, fuck. That’s what you wanted, right?” Lachlan lowered me to my feet but didn’t give me a second to breathe before he pinned me to the door. His hand flexed against my collarbone, holding me there. “For me to fuck you. It’s what you’re begging for.” Dark eyes swallowed by the black of his blown pupils narrowed hungrily on mine.

“God, yes.” He was right. I was begging shamelessly, letting my desire for him completely take over. I could be embarrassed later, after I was so satiated I couldn’t lift my head to give a damn.

I arched my hips toward him and brought his free hand to my covered cock.

He gave me a strong squeeze. “Trying to call the shots, Cooper?”

Before I could answer, he had my pants undone and on the floor, kicking them aside with the shiny tip of his oxfords.

My erection jutted out, flushed and pointing at him. I felt a supreme satisfaction at the way Lachlan’s eyes roamed over me, and any lingering doubt that he wasn’t as attracted to me as I was to him vanished.

He removed his belt, letting it drop to the ground. “Take your shirt off.”

I pulled it over my head and, feeling a little high off the way he was looking at me, threw it at him.

He caught it and held my gaze as he brought the shirt up to his face and inhaled deeply.

Shit. That had me full-on trembling—and not just because I was completely naked.

Lachlan tossed the shirt across his shoulder and began to undo the cuffs of his sleeves. “Turn around.”

I hesitated.

“Is that a problem for you, Cooper?”

“No.” I swallowed and tried to calm my breathing. “I just want to see you first.”

With a smirk, he undid and slipped off his tie.

“You’re a bossy little fuck when you’re feeling desperate.” He took both my wrists, looped the tie around them, and tied it into a complex knot. “In case you get the urge to touch and not take what I give you.”

Then he stepped back and undid the buttons of his shirt, and I didn't even try to escape. It amped everything up and put me totally under Lachlan's control.

God, this was becoming a pattern with me.

I stared as he revealed his body for me, and one thing became clear: Lachlan Stone was breathtaking.

He'd always filled out a suit perfectly, but it was hiding a powerfully built physique. Strong shoulders and arms that had lifted me up over his shoulder far too easily, muscular thighs and calves dusted with dark hair. My eyes zeroed in on his cock, so long and thick I could remember the way it felt in my mouth.

I wanted to lick and suck and touch every inch of him and hoped I'd get the chance, because right now wasn't the time. I wasn't going to last long.

Like it had a mind of its own, my erection twitched, pre-cum dripping down. I reached down with my bound hands and pinched the head, trying to get it under some control.

"Uh uh," Lachlan said, pushing my hands up over my head. He leaned in close, brushing his mouth over mine and causing another shiver of anticipation. "This is why I had to tie you up. Already grabbing things you shouldn't."

"My apologies," I said, but I was grinning, ready for his punishment. A slap on the ass, maybe. But Lachlan bent down to lick my slit, and my breath left my body.

His tongue was gone too soon, and I thrust my hips forward, hoping to get more, but he straightened and pushed two of his fingers into my mouth. "Suck me."

I did as I was told, getting them nice and wet and praying they were about to go where I was hoping.

He pulled them free and flipped me around, my cheek meeting the door and my arms up over my head.

Lachlan's drenched fingers entered me, stretching me apart and lighting me on fire. The burn didn't last long, my arousal overriding the bite of pain.

And judging by the way I'd choked on his cock last night, I was going to need the prep.

"I'm ready," I said, my voice strained. "Please, Lachlan."

His fingers stilled inside me. "Please, Lachlan, what?"

“Please fuck me.”

For a moment, he was gone, his fingers no longer filling my channel. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him roll a condom on and squeeze a packet of lube over it.

Then he spread my cheeks open and guided his dick to my entrance. I barely had time to breathe out before he shoved himself inside. Nothing soft and gentle—rough, exactly the way I wanted it.

He rocked against my ass, pushing in deeper and deeper, inch by glorious inch, until his chest was plastered against my back.

Oh God. He was so far inside me that I couldn’t tell where he ended and I began, and for a few heartbeats, he didn’t move, just held still and dropped his mouth to my neck and sucked on the skin.

But then he began to move, pulling out to the tip only to drive back inside, again and again, each time faster. He reached up to my bound hands to brace me while he wrapped a slick fist around my cock. Matching the pace of his hips, he jerked me off, expertly keeping me right on the edge.

I rested my head against my bicep and closed my eyes, getting lost in the way he fucked me. The way he held me there, arms up over my head and restrained at my wrists.

My eyes flew open as the shock of déjà vu rolled through me.

But as quickly as it came, it disappeared, and so did Lachlan’s hold on every part of me. He turned me back to face him, hitched me up his body so that I had to wrap my legs around him to hold on, and then kissed me.

We were moving, but with his cock deep inside me and his tongue tangling with mine, I didn’t care where we were going.

I clenched my ass tight around him, and he moaned in my mouth, a satisfying sound that had me doing it again. “Fuck, Cooper.” Then he changed direction suddenly and planted my ass on something cold.

The long dining room table.

Our lips parted long enough that I was able to put my bound arms up over his neck, keeping him close as he drove into me and sucked my tongue into his mouth.

I thought it was good having him take me from behind, but being this close, face to face, was even better. I could look at him while I was kissing him. See every little expression he made. Watch the way his muscles flexed as he fucked, and relish the way his fist worked my dick.

Seeing it, though, also made it more intense, and I was already struggling not to come.

I slammed my eyes shut and kissed him harder, but it did nothing to stop the climax forcing its way down my spine. I tore my mouth away. “Shit, I—”

“I know.” Lachlan picked up speed, driving himself deeper and encouraging the orgasm I couldn’t hold back. “Give it to me.”

I came with a shout, gasping when he angled my cock so that I shot my load all over his chest and down his abs. The second my cum touched his skin, Lachlan’s hips jerked erratically, and unlike last night, I got to see how he looked when he came. Down my throat or in my ass, it didn’t matter, not when I saw the flash of ecstasy as he locked eyes with me and tensed.

I was speechless as the aftershocks rolled through us. Only the sound of our heavy breathing filled the room, and I was grateful for my arms being bound around him, because without him holding me up, I would collapse.

Which, at this moment, also seemed like a pretty accurate description of my life.

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LACHLAN

I WOKE TO the soft sighs of someone in a deep, satisfied slumber late Sunday morning. It was a foreign sound to my ears, one I hadn't woken up to in a long time. I turned my head on the pillow and focused on Cooper.

Damn. What is it about this guy I can't seem to shake?

From the moment I laid eyes on him I'd felt the need to go to him, and every moment since it felt as though we'd been drawn to one another.

Not that he knew that.

As far as he was aware, our connection had started over an innocent cup of coffee. I had no idea how he'd react if he knew there was much more to our acquaintance than he was aware of—like a mask and a nighttime visit from a stranger.

So I had to wonder how wise it was for me to allow this relationship to continue.

There was a word I rarely used—*relationship*. But as Cooper stretched beneath the sheets and tangled his legs with mine, I realized that was exactly what was happening here—one hell of a complicated relationship.

My life didn't leave room for long-lasting ties, not with the secrets I'd vowed to uphold. But somewhere between stepping in to save Cooper's life, and right now as he curled into my side, the need to be close to someone outside of my brothers had taken over.

That the *someone* happened to be a journalist wasn't conducive to my way of life, though. King would never stand for it. Cooper's presence here

was temporary—it had even said so on the NDA he signed, so any other thoughts I was having right then just needed to shut the fuck up.

I couldn't keep him. So there was no point in hoping I could.

"Good morning." Cooper's sleepy voice broke through my annoying logic, as he shifted on the mattress beside me and ran a lazy hand across my chest. "Couldn't sleep?"

Not about to tell him I'd been too busy thinking about all the reasons we shouldn't be together to sleep, I opted for the easy way out. I rolled him over to his back and distracted him, and myself, with the one thing I knew would work.

"I slept," I whispered across his kiss-swollen lips. "But then I woke up and realized it'd been too fucking long since I've had a taste of you."

Cooper took hold of my ass and gave it a squeeze. "Well, don't let me stop you."

I knew I should go. That I should climb out of his arms and out of this bed before I got in even deeper with him. But when Cooper nipped at my lower lip and wrapped his legs around mine, I had the perfect excuse to stay.

I took his lips in a lazy kiss. It was unhurried, sweet—perfection, really, the kind of kiss you could easily lose yourself inside of. But that was the last thing I should be doing right now.

I reached for his wandering hands and brought them up to pin them by his pillow, and as I raised my head and took in the flush on his cheeks, my cock stood up and took notice.

A smug grin tugged at the corner of Cooper's mouth. "Well, that answers one question."

"Of course you woke up with questions."

"Of course I did."

"And what question might that be?"

"If you regret what we did last night."

For a second I thought about lying. About telling him it was a mistake and it could never happen again. But that was hardly believable when my dick was already reacquainting itself with his.

Plus, I didn't want to lie to him—any more than I already had, at least.

I was so fucked.

"Does this *feel* like I regretted it?" My hands tightened at his wrists as I rubbed myself over the top of his lithe body.

“I guess I have my answer.” Cooper bit down on his lower lip. “You like pinning me down like this, huh?”

The observation caught me off guard, but was so innately Cooper that it shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Even when he was hard and horny, he had *questions*.

This time, though, his question was a little too close for comfort. I couldn’t give myself away by having the same moves as my alter ego.

I released Cooper’s wrists and shifted off him.

“Hey.” He rolled onto his side. “I didn’t say I didn’t like it.”

I already knew *that*. Every time I’d restrained him as myself *or* the masked stranger, he’d gotten off on it. But I was treading a thin line here.

“Oh, I know, but if I keep you under me, we’re not going to leave this bed anytime soon.”

“And that would be bad because…”

“Because at some point you might want to eat.”

“Eh.” Cooper shrugged. “Who needs food?”

At that exact moment, his stomach growled.

“Okay, ignore that,” he said, laughing.

“Seriously? We can order something up here—”

“Nope.” Cooper shook his head and scooted back into my side. “I don’t want or need food right now, I just want to enjoy this moment of normalcy for a few more minutes.”

My chest tightened as I wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him into my side. The fact he thought being in a stranger’s penthouse—where he was cut off from the outside world in every way—was normal made me…sad.

That was no way to live, and yet here he was risking his life, his happiness, all to avenge his friend. That said a lot about who he was, and I respected the hell out of him. It showed the same kind of loyalty I would’ve any of my fellow Kings.

Cooper laid his head on my shoulder, resting his hand over the top of my chest, and as we settled into one another he said, “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Helping me. Bringing me here. It’s pretty obvious you weren’t meant to.”

“It doesn’t matter. It wasn’t safe at your place. But you’re—”

“Safe here.” He said it so matter-of-factly that I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the penthouse or my arms, but somewhere inside I hoped he meant the latter.

Something about Cooper brought out a protective side of me I’d never felt before. I wasn’t sure if it was the circumstances in which we’d met or the fact he was so out of his element here in the city, chasing down people like Mick, whom he should never have to know exist. But it made me want to keep him locked away until any and all danger had passed.

“Yes. You’re safe here.”

“And that’s why I want to take a moment to enjoy it.”

I couldn’t fault him for that. I also didn’t hate the way he was cuddling me. I was so used to sleeping alone that I’d almost forgotten what it was like *not* to.

“You’re quiet,” Cooper whispered. “You fall back asleep?”

“Nope. Wide awake.”

“So just quiet by nature. That part of the job?”

“It can be.”

Cooper chuckled. “Always so evasive.”

“And you’re always so curious.”

“That’s why I ended up a journalist.” He raised his head, his blue eyes meeting mine, and for a second I forgot to breathe. Damn, he was fucking beautiful. “Even as a kid I had a hundred and one questions. Seemed like the natural conclusion.”

“That or interrogation.” Cooper’s eyes widened. “Uh, not that I would know.” I winked, doing my best to dodge the questions now swirling in his eyes.

“Uh huh.”

“It’s true.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I believe you. But I think you know someone who does.”

“Do you now?”

“Yep. I think you know a lot of people with a lot of different…skills.”

I refused to lie to him any more than I already had, so instead, I stayed silent.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“That I know a lot of people? Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. “Lachlan.”

“What? I do.”

“But you won’t tell me who they are.”

“I mean, I could,” I said. “But then I’d have to kill you.”

Cooper froze, and I realized that probably wasn’t the best joke in his current situation.

“I’m just kidding,” I reassured him. “I can’t tell you because it’s not only *my* secret to tell.”

“I can respect that,” he said, settling back down, his head on my chest. “Must be hard, though.”

“What’s that?” I said, running a hand over the back of his hair.

“Living with so many secrets. Must be hard to be with someone, not being able to open up.”

“I’m with you, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but that’s different. We were kind of pushed together.”

“You don’t think we would’ve ended up here if you’d called me for a date instead of help?”

For the first time since we’d started talking, Cooper hesitated, choosing instead to draw shapes across my chest.

“Cooper?”

When he still didn’t respond, I took his chin in hand and angled his face so I could look him in the eye.

“You don’t think you would’ve ended up in my bed if we’d gone on a normal date?”

“Well, technically, this isn’t your bed.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But it’s also a convenient way to give a non-answer.”

“Says the king of non-answers.”

“So I know what I’m talking about.”

“Right.” Cooper sighed. “It’s not that I didn’t think or want to end up here. I just wasn’t sure…”

“Wasn’t sure about what?”

“If you really wanted it or if it was just in my head.”

I drew his hand down to my still-hard dick. “Does *that* feel like it’s in your head?”

“No.” He chuckled and wrapped his fingers around me. “I just figured someone as confident and…sexy as you wouldn’t be interested in someone

like me, that's all. That what happened in the coffee shop was a fluke. Or that, I don't know, you were taken."

"It wasn't a fluke, and define *taken*, because right now I'm pretty fucking taken by a curious journalist with big blue eyes and a penchant for getting himself into tricky situations."

"Well, lucky for *him*, he's found someone to look out for him." Cooper gave me a gentle squeeze. "Someone to watch over him."

Hearing him say it made that drive even stronger. I pulled him up over me, capturing his lips with mine.

"I'll watch you for as long as you need me to." *And probably long after…*

"Are you sure?" Cooper ran his hands through my hair. "The need is pretty strong."

"You see me running?"

He shook his head. "I can't imagine you running from anything."

I had a flash of the two of us back in that alley, and my telling *him* to run. It was crazy, but at times I could swear he was talking to his masked stranger instead of me. But there was no way he would've put those two pieces of the puzzle together without saying something.

"There are things that scare me."

"Like what?"

"Oh, no you don't." I nipped at his lower lip. It was time to put an end to this before he dug a little too deep. "No more questions. It's food time."

"Fine… Oh." Cooper jerked up, his eyes sparkling. "Are we going down to the restaurant? The one that made that fancy chicken?"

"If you want to." I'd barely gotten the words out before he was out of bed and racing over to the bathroom door. "I take it that works for you?"

Cooper slid to a stop and glanced back. "Are you kidding? That was the best thing I've ever put in my mouth."

"Should I be offended?"

Cooper bit his lip. "Okay, the *second* best thing. Are you coming?"

I wasn't yet, but I would be. I threw back the sheet, and moments later we were under the warm spray of the shower.

We took our time lathering each other up, food once again on the backburner when faced with one another's naked bodies, and after we'd satiated that particular hunger, another one reared its head—Cooper's stomach.

“I’M SORRY.” HE laughed at his rumbling stomach as we stepped out of the penthouse and into the elevator.

“Don’t be.” I pushed the button for the restaurant’s floor and winked at him. “We made it wait a little longer than it probably wanted to.”

As the doors slid shut, I was tempted to pull Cooper into my arms and take his lips in a hard, possessive kiss, but I was all too aware of the camera in the corner.

“After you,” I said when we reached our floor.

A bright smile lit Cooper’s face as he exited, and then my phone began to vibrate. I pulled it out of my pocket, about to hit ignore until I saw who it was.

“Your boss?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve got to take this, but you should go ahead. Order anything you like and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Cooper looked to my phone, his eyes narrowing. I wasn’t exactly thrilled with King’s timing either.

“No worries. Do you want me to order you anything?”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

Cooper’s smile fell a little, so I took hold of his arm and pulled him back to me.

“I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Okay.”

“I promise.” I brushed a thumb across his lips. Apparently I was a guy who made promises now.

“I’ll save you a seat.”

I winked at him and as I began to walk away, said, “You better.”

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COOPER

WHITE TRUFFLE PIZZA…
Bluefin tuna sushi…
Wagyu or Kobe beef…
Gold flake tacos…

The items on the menu were out of a foodie's dream. There were no prices listed, and Lachlan had sent me in here with the instruction to order anything I like. That was wild.

I'd watched enough cooking shows to know that everything cost more than most people made in a month—maybe six months depending on what else they put into the meal.

Yet I was supposed to just order like this wasn't going to be one of the most mind-blowing experiences of my life. This might be an everyday occurrence for Lachlan, but for me it was completely overwhelming.

In fact, everything in the last twenty-four hours had been that way, from gaining the freedom of access to this place, to winding up in bed with one of the sexiest men I'd ever met.

It was difficult to believe this was my life right now, that I'd not only spent the night with Lachlan Stone but woken up in his arms. I wasn't ashamed to admit I'd imagined that exact scenario after our coffee meeting. But when I didn't call and time passed, that fantasy I'd allowed myself to indulge in had slipped away and been replaced by a darker one. One that seemed incredibly reckless, given the events that had followed.

Lachlan had offered a safe, secure option, and yet I'd opened my window to a mystery man instead.

Something about that stranger on that night had seemed easier than the rejection I might've gotten from the confident man I'd sat across from sipping a cappuccino. Lachlan was real, offered the possibility of an actual connection, whereas my vigilante had been a mere fantasy.

So imagine my surprise when reality actually turned out to be better than the dream.

Last night had been incredible. Finally getting my hands on Lachlan had been nothing short of spectacular. His body was a work of art. We'd been in sync, as if we'd done this all before, our bodies knowing exactly what the other wanted without a word said.

So knowing he had no regrets just made everything even more perfect.

"Hi there."

I shook myself out of my thoughts and glanced up to see a woman with sweeping black bangs, a high ponytail, and a wide smile.

"Are you ready to place your order?"

"I…" I looked back to the menu and frowned. "I'm not sure."

"I understand. There's a lot of good choices on there." She tapped the screen of her small tablet.

"You're telling me. I, um, I was wondering if you could maybe bring me a price list? I know they're not listed because most people that come here probably have unlimited credit cards or whatever, but I'm, uh, not that person, so…"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that." She chuckled. "There's no payment taken here."

I blinked at her, sure I'd misheard. "Excuse me?"

"There are no prices on the menu because we don't take payment. Your meals are part of your membership whenever you're here. You must be new."

What kind of membership fees covered meals like this whenever someone wanted them? Extraordinarily expensive ones, I assumed.

"Sir?"

"Sorry. I'm not new, I'm a guest."

"My apologies. If you're a guest here, the same rules apply. The meals are taken care of by your host's account."

So Lachlan would be picking up this tab?

Order anything you like. They were his exact words, and didn't he mention having some kind of clout in the restaurant? Maybe that was why he'd given me carte blanche.

Who in the hell was he that he could afford meals like this?

"Let's go with the white truffle pizza."

"That's an excellent choice. Will your host be joining you?"

"Yes, so if you could wait until he arrives to start?"

"Of course. Would you like anything to drink?"

Almost afraid to know what was on *that* menu, I stuck with water and watched as she headed off to put in my order.

I relaxed back into the leather cushion of the booth and took a moment to look at my surroundings now that I'd done the impossible and picked something to eat. Men of varying ages sat at tables and booths much like the one I was in, chatting amongst themselves.

It was interesting to note that while all the men were impeccably dressed, they weren't all decked out in suits like Lachlan preferred. Not that I was complaining. I'd recently discovered that watching him take a suit off was a brand-new fetish of mine. One I planned to indulge in as long as he would allow.

A couple of men were laughing at something as they sipped on what was, no doubt, the most expensive coffee in New York. A table of four to their left were sharing what looked like a steaming pan of paella.

Anything you wanted, at any time of the day, was at your fingertips. This place was slightly intimidating.

It wasn't until I looked across the bar that I spotted two young men—early twenties, maybe—engaged in a very public and intense make-out session. The one sitting had dark hair and glasses, and the one standing between his legs was in a suit and an…ascot?

I lowered my eyes, not wanting to be caught staring, because while that was probably acceptable on level five, I doubted these two wanted an audience while they were sitting down for a meal. If they managed not to eat each other first.

Not that I could talk. If Lachlan had been here I'd probably be doing my best to crawl into his lap, but he was more careful than that. He had been reluctant to publicly do anything with me because—what did he say? Someone was always watching.

Didn’t seem to bother these two, though, and I wondered if that had something to do with their age. They had to be a good few years younger than I was, and yet they were here, at one of the most prestigious places in Manhattan?

Not that I knew what that place was, exactly.

It wasn’t until the one standing glanced over at me that I realized I’d been caught staring.

Shit.

I looked down at the table, wishing like hell that phones or laptops were allowed in this place, because it would give me something to do other than avoid a full-on stare-down. But I was stuck memorizing the intricate gold swirls embossed on the wooden table.

It wasn’t until I felt the seat dip beside me that I realized someone had slid into the booth.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here? A new face in the crowd?”

The smooth voice asking the question was full of arrogance as I looked up to find the ascot guy seated beside me. I was about to answer when the man with the dark hair and glasses took the seat opposite and shook his head.

“East, cut it out.”

“What? I’m not doing anything.”

“Aren’t you?” Glasses smiled at me and held his hand out. “Hi, I’m Zac, and this is—”

“James Easton,” East said as though his full name should mean something to me. “Everyone around here calls me East, and I know what to call everyone but you. So who are you…?”

“*East*,” Zac said, but East didn’t seem at all bothered by it. “He’s obviously here because he’s allowed to be, so why don’t you back off for a second and pretend you have some manners?”

“Because we both know that I don’t.” East aimed a saccharine smile at his partner, who scoffed.

“You’ll have to ignore him for a second. East thinks he knows everyone in the city—”

“I *do* know everyone in the city, *Zacharius*. Everyone who’s important, anyway.” East ran his judgmental gaze over me. “But we’re not just talking the city now, are we? Libertine welcomes members from all places, national and international. So again, who are you?”

Libertine? So now I had a name for whatever this place was. But since I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be talking to other people while I was staying here, I didn't know what I could and couldn't say.

Did Lachlan want me to keep quiet? Keep my identity a secret?

He hadn't said anything like that when he left to take his call, though maybe he'd forgotten. But that wasn't like him. He was too careful to have left without giving me strict instructions.

When I didn't answer, East turned in my direction and rested an arm along the back of the booth. "You're obviously new."

"Am I?"

As my best bet was to be as evasive as possible, I decided to give this East a taste of his own medicine. I had permission to be here. Hell, I'd signed an NDA to be here. Lachlan had cleared this with his boss. So what did I care what this guy thought? It wasn't like he ran the place.

"Yes. Otherwise I'd know you," East said.

"You sure about that?"

Zac chuckled as he flagged down the waitress.

"Yes, Mr. Fletcher?

"Could you bring us a couple martinis? Make sure to put an olive in East's—he hasn't eaten today, and it's making him grumpy. And for you?" Zac glanced at me.

"I'll just stick to my water, thanks."

So martinis for lunch. Was this how the other half lived?

"Don't think I've forgotten you didn't answer me," East said, tapping the table.

"Oh, I haven't."

"And you're not going to, are you?"

"What was the question again?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Cooper." I held my hand out to him, and he arched a brow.

"Cooper…?"

"Patterson."

"I don't know that name."

"And up until a few minutes ago, I didn't know yours."

He scoffed as though that was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "You don't know my name?"

"No. Sorry. Am I supposed to?"

East narrowed his eyes on me as if trying to decide if I was lying. “You’re not from New York.”

“No.”

“And you’re definitely not a new member, because we would know.”

What did this place do? Send out an email whenever someone signed up? That seemed a little pedestrian for a place that was so private and well funded.

Maybe I could weasel some information out of these two. Ask a couple of questions I had.

“How would you know?”

East smirked. “We have…connections.”

“You mean money.”

“Well, yes, everyone that sets foot in this place has money.” He looked me over and angled his head to the side. “Except maybe you, which makes me think you’re someone’s guest.”

This guy was good, and I wondered if this was how Lachlan felt when I questioned him, like I was talking in circles until I got to the actual information I wanted.

I was about to give another evasive answer when Lachlan stepped inside the restaurant, and my heart skipped several beats.

All put together in his suit and tie with his hair pushed back off his face, and those silver bracelets at his wrists, it was difficult *not* to stare as he stopped and scanned the restaurant, searching me out.

I swallowed around the lump in the back of my throat.

“Ah, now the pieces are starting to fall into place,” East said.

I had no idea what he was talking about, nor did I care. I was too busy drinking in the sight of Lachlan as he started forward. It wasn’t until he stopped by the edge of our booth that I even noticed the other man behind him, which was a testament to how distracting Lachlan was, because this new guy was all kinds of intense.

East grinned at the two men, seemingly unbothered by either.

“Move,” Lachlan barked, and East’s smile grew even wider.

“Well, that’s rude.”

“Ask me if I care.”

Something about the way Lachlan was telling this pompous little shit to get out of his way made the ache in my dick even more intense.

“Zac and I were just having a chat with Cooper here. Your guest, I presume?”

The serious man beside Lachlan looked to East and crooked two fingers at him—and wouldn’t you know it, East obeyed. He and Zac got to their feet to stand beside the man dressed in all black. The pristine suit with his dark skin and stern expression only made him more forbidding.

“I trust you were *polite* in welcoming Cooper to Libertine?” he said as Lachlan slid in to take East’s spot.

“Of course,” East said as though he hadn’t just grilled me like I was an interloper—which I kind of was.

“We just ordered some drinks and were going to keep him company,” Zac explained. “But it seems there’s no need now.”

The man inclined his head, and as he stepped up to the booth, Lachlan’s shoulders straightened as though he had a pole jammed up his spine.

“Hello, Cooper, I’m Tyrone Kingston. Welcome to Libertine. Have you been enjoying your stay?”

“Yes, sir,” I said automatically.

“I’m glad to hear it, and I’ve taken up enough of Lachlan’s time this morning, so I’ll leave you both to your lunch.” He turned to the two men waiting beside him. “I have a free moment or…two. Have any idea on how I could spend them?”

The flush that hit Zac’s cheeks matched the sensual gleam in East’s eyes as they forgot the newcomer at the table and happily followed this Tyrone guy out of the restaurant.

It wasn’t until they were out of sight that Lachlan visibly relaxed. He slid his arm across the booth behind my shoulders and turned his attention on me.

“Hi.”

One word, that was all it took and heat flooded my entire body. “Hi.”

“I don’t see any food in front of you—did East interrupt you before you could order?”

“No, I ordered the truffle pizza but had them hold it until you got here.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I wanted to.” Not sure if I was allowed to touch him here but needing to more than my next breath, I bumped my leg up against his and smiled. “That man, Tyrone? That’s your boss, isn’t it?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Everyone’s response to him. The second he came in, the air changed. Like someone important had walked into the room.”

Lachlan chuckled and nodded. “That’s an accurate assessment, and yes, he’s the *most* important person in this building. We call him King.”

“Huh.” I sat back in my seat, thinking back to when I saw Zac and East making out at the bar, and how they had responded to King. East said they had a “connection.” What bigger connection was the owner, or manager, of this place?

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Lachlan asked.

I shrugged. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s definitely not nothing. Your cheeks are pink.”

“What? No they’re not.” I touched my face. “It’s just… King is with those two?”

“If you’re asking if they just left here to go and fuck somewhere, then yes, that’s exactly what they just did.”

“But…they were making out with each other earlier.”

“That’s right.” Lachlan leaned in by my ear. “The *three* of them are together.”

“Oh.”

Lachlan winked as the waitress arrived at our table carrying our pizza and two plates.

Once she left, I whispered, “He’s kind of scary.”

“King?”

“Yeah.”

“I hope that’s something you can get over.”

Get over? It wasn’t like I was going to see him again. “Why?”

“Because the reason he called me away today was to tell me that our guys are meeting this week, and he wants *you* to be there.”

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COOPER

IT WAS THE first time in days I'd opened my laptop, but when Lachlan needed to get work of his own done, we made our way down to the business center.

When I'd asked if being glued to me was one of the stipulations of my stay, he'd only given me a look, but that wasn't a no. I chose to believe he stayed because he couldn't bear to be away from me, but the thought made me roll my own eyes at myself. I'd barely scratched the surface of who Lachlan was, and now I was dreaming of happily-ever-afters? I needed to get it the fuck together.

Starting with my article.

Now that I had a few more firsthand details, I could fill in what I knew about Mick and his guys so far. Better to get it down while it was all fresh in my mind, and the words practically flew from my fingers. It was a hell of a difference from a few days ago, when I wanted to bash my head on the keyboard from a lack of information. It finally felt like I was getting somewhere, and that had everything to do with Lachlan and his connections.

My eyes drifted over to where he'd set up several workspaces away. He didn't like to sit while he worked, that much was clear from the way he paced while on calls, only occasionally referring to one of several screens.

It was hot to watch him like this. He was an in-control, bossy type, but it suited him.

And speaking of suits, no one, and I mean *no one*, filled out a tailored suit better than Lachlan Stone. Today it was navy with a matching tie. Crisp white shirt. Silver bracelets stacked around his wrist. Since he wasn't at the office, I'd figured he'd go a bit more casual, maybe even take off the jacket and roll up his sleeves. At least I would. Then again, I was in jeans and a t-shirt most of the time, so I wasn't exactly the model for running a business.

Lachlan stopped moving and turned in my direction, his dark brows knitted together, but when his eyes met mine, his forehead smoothed out.

Busted again for staring. It was becoming a thing with us.

His eyes roamed over me, at first as if he was checking to make sure I was all good, and once it was clear I was ogling him, quickly turned heated.

Oh shit, I felt that look. Everywhere.

I suddenly hated the fact that we weren't alone down here, but maybe that was for the best. I'd never get anything done if I kept trying to jump his bones.

Lachlan shot me a wink before returning to his conversation, and my stomach flipped before I forced my eyes back to the screen.

Focus.

I went back to the top and read through what I'd written so far. I was missing some visual detail, and though the images from the night in the alley should've been seared in my mind, I needed to pull up the photos I'd taken to make sure I got it right.

Glancing over my shoulder to make sure Lachlan was otherwise occupied, I brought up the picture folder and clicked on the first photo. Without a flash, it had been dark, but I could still make out the men standing several feet away while I hid behind a dumpster.

It wasn't like I'd had much of a choice where to hide. The spur-of-the-moment decision to follow them had led me somewhere without a lot of options, and it was pure luck they hadn't noticed me.

My heart began to race as I clicked through the photos, realizing how close I'd been to danger. To losing my life. It was easy to sit back now and ask "what was I thinking?" but I hadn't been thinking. I'd been doing, so consumed with finding out more and exposing the pieces of shit involved that I'd forgotten how to be cautious.

Not that being careful in my line of work would ever get me anywhere.

But I was too nosy, had too much of a one-track mind to give a damn about anything but getting the story and getting justice. What would I have done if the masked man hadn't shown up when he did?

I'd be missing a head in Queens, that was what.

So I had some mystery stranger to thank—though maybe I'd thanked him sufficiently when he snuck into my window. When I let him have full control over my body.

I pinched my brow as *those* memories came flooding back.

How did I keep falling into bed with strangers? That wasn't like me. Just like the people in those sex clubs, I seemed to have lost all my inhibitions and welcomed anonymous orgasms.

Well, Lachlan wasn't really a stranger. I knew him, his name, his job, that he was a good guy. Or maybe *protective* was a better word than *good*. After all, I'd seen the way he twisted the guy's arm at the club when the man tried to put hands on me. Anyone with moves like that had a reason for them.

He's in security—of course he's got a reason.

But how wild was it that I'd met two men, two badasses at that, they'd both rescued me when I needed it, and both were freaking *incredible* in bed.

I glanced at Lachlan and felt heat hit my cheeks before averting my eyes.

While there was something forbidden and sexy about the stranger, I couldn't deny that being with Lachlan was exciting in an entirely different way. Seeing him, being face to face, getting to know him…*that* was what made me interested. I wanted to reveal all those hidden layers of his, not for a story, but for me.

"What the hell is that?"

I jumped at Lachlan's voice behind me and looked up to see him staring at the photo on the screen.

"Uh, nothing," I said, closing the picture. "Just research. How'd your call go?"

He ignored my sad attempt at changing the subject. "Where did that photo come from? Did you take it?"

I had two choices. I could lie and risk Lachlan seeing right through me, or I could tell the truth and hope he didn't ask too many more questions about it.

I went with option three: “I *might’ve* taken it.”

“Try again.”

“Remember when I said I followed a guy?”

He nodded. “From the club.”

“Right.” I brought the photo back up on the screen. “Well, it was more like guys, and that little escapade took me to an alley in Queens.”

Lachlan leaned in, resting a hand on the back of my chair as he studied the photo.

“They were trying to move some product, but it got ugly, and—” How the hell did I tell him how I got involved without mentioning the mystery man? I didn’t want to get him in trouble, not when he’d saved my life. “Anyway, I managed to get away, but I dropped my phone at some point, and I’m guessing that’s when I accidentally picked up the key card. I didn’t realize it until I got home.”

The muscle in Lachlan’s jaw twitched, and he nodded at the screen. “Show me the others.”

I clicked through the photos one by one and wondered what had happened to those men once I left the alley. I’d combed through the news, but there had been nothing to do with anything that happened that night. It was like it’d all been wiped away. If I hadn’t been there, if I didn’t have these pictures as proof, I’d wonder if I had imagined the whole thing.

“Go back to the last one,” Lachlan said, and then pointed at something in the far corner. “Zoom in on the driver.”

I did as he asked, as much as I could, anyway. It wasn’t the clearest picture of the background, but even I could make out that it was…

“That jackass from the club,” he confirmed.

The one whose arm he’d twisted. I definitely didn’t remember his being there, but then again, I wasn’t paying attention to the van driver when I had a gun pointed at my head.

“You said you got away,” Lachlan said. “Did anyone see you?”

“Uh, no. I mean, it was dark and I didn’t think anyone saw me, but I also didn’t expect someone to trash my place, so…”

Lachlan shot up and resumed his pacing, clearly trying to rein in his temper—jaw clenched, face set in a stony mask. Every muscle in his body wound tight.

Was he upset *at* me or *for* me?

“Lachlan?”

When he didn’t answer, I stood and wanted to go over to him, but maybe giving him space was better.

“Lachlan—”

“Just give me a minute.”

I snapped my mouth shut, but something had obviously triggered him. And I couldn’t just let it go.

“Lachlan, if I could—”

He turned around suddenly, so fast I lost my words.

“You asked me last night what scares me,” he said, his voice gravel rough. “Not being there if you get into a bad situation… *That* scares me.”

I reared back, blinking as I tried to wrap my head around his words. That admission was *not* what I’d expected. An unfamiliar feeling flooded my chest as I stared at him.

“Do you…mean that?” I hesitated to even ask, but I had to be sure I’d heard him right.

The fierce, protective look in his eyes took my breath away. “Yes.”

There was no doubt in my mind that he meant it. I felt his admission so deep in my bones, and I wondered what I’d done to deserve it.

My mouth moved, but I couldn’t force anything out. I wasn’t even sure what to say to that, and it wasn’t like I could promise I’d never get into a bad situation again. My short time in New York had proven I compromised my safety on a regular basis, intentionally or not.

But the fact that he *wanted* to be there…

I launched myself at him without thinking, wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him in for a kiss, letting that be my response. For a moment, his lips parted, greeting my tongue eagerly, but then I felt him tense again before drawing back.

His eyes shifted up to the corner, and I immediately realized my mistake.

The cameras.

“Shit. Sorry,” I said, putting some space between us.

“Don’t be sorry.” He glanced up at the corner again and swore. But before I could get any farther, Lachlan reached for me, both hands cupping my face, and just before his lips crashed down on mine, he said, “Fuck it.”

And just like that, every other thought I had flew out of my head.

There was no trashed apartment.

No masked man.

No need to confess I’d figured out exactly where this building was thanks to the view and Google Earth.

No article.

No meeting with King this week.

Nothing.

There was just Lachlan, his strong hands holding me tight to him and stealing my breath. Making me feel wanted, safe, and aroused, all at the same time.

Even with the cameras watching.

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26

LACHLAN

IT WAS AFTER midnight when I slipped out of bed and quietly got dressed. Cooper didn't move, dead to the world, and I envied the way he could sleep so hard. I didn't think I'd ever been able to do that, not since I was a kid. Was it because he felt safe with me? Anyone who actually knew me would laugh at that. I wasn't the man people ran to; I was the man they ran *from*.

But Cooper hadn't done that. Not even when I'd been fully covered in the alley. I'd had to *tell* him to run.

I put my tie on, then left the room before I was tempted to stay. The sheets had fallen down to his hips, giving me an incredible view of his body that made me want to wake him up with my tongue.

Glancing down at my watch, I inwardly cursed and grabbed my suit jacket from the closet. The last thing I needed was a bitch-fest from Alessio for being late, so I made my way underground to meet the others.

They were all waiting in the shadows of the hallway, and when Alessio held up the watch on his wrist, I said, "I know. I'm here."

"Late. And with bedhead."

For fuck's sake. I ran my fingers through my hair as the others, dressed impeccably, led the way through the tunnels beneath the city. Even Alessio, who hated wearing a suit, was wearing one, calling it a respect thing. Same with being on time.

But Alessio didn't have a hot body in his bed that he'd had to drag himself away from.

He fell back in step with me to bring up the rear and shook his head. “Wearing yesterday’s old suit. You couldn’t dig up a fresh one?”

“Don’t start with me.” I tugged at the cuffs, straightening them. “I look fine.”

“You look like someone who’s been rolling around in the sheets.”

“Well, it’s not like Father Vitale would know that now, would he? *If* that’s what I’d been doing.”

A frown pulled between Alessio’s brows. “You trying to tell me it’s not?”

“Hey,” Theo called back to us. “You two going to stop gossiping like a couple of high schoolers? Or do you need a minute?”

“Alessio was just reading me the riot act,” I said, and started toward the rest of the group. “You know how it goes—nothing’s ever good enough for the father.”

Shep gave me a once-over and scoffed. “You do look like you just rolled out of bed. What happened? Did you forget you had a meeting to save your soul? I figured if any of us needed to set an alarm clock this month, it would be you.”

“At least I’ve done more to help this city than shake a few clammy palms at the governor’s mansion.”

He smirked. “We all have our strengths. You exterminate rats in alleys. I swim with sharks in ballrooms. Want to swap?”

“Not on your fucking life.”

Shep chuckled and clapped my shoulder. “I figured.”

“Okay, let’s keep moving,” King said, eyeing the rest of us. “We don’t want to keep Father Vitale waiting.”

As we continued through the tunnels and deep into the heart of the city, Alessio and I fell back behind the rest of the guys, a usual position for us when we were making this monthly trek.

The sound of footsteps up ahead was the only other noise this far under the city, and as we moved through the familiar shadows on our way to St. Andrews, I glanced at the man beside me.

Alessio Trentacapelli was, as always, making this trek like he was at the head of a funeral march, the somber expression on his face one of pain and suffering that had nothing to do with death and everything to do with our final destination.

It was ironic, really, considering he was the one who was so adamant we attend monthly confessional to save our souls, yet his seemed to be the truly tortured one, and he wouldn't set foot in a confessional booth.

"You okay over there?" I said as we rounded a corner. "You stare any harder at the ground and you might cause a sinkhole."

"I'm fine. I just hate being late."

"We're not going to be late. And even if we are, Father Vitale won't care."

Alessio grunted and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Can we talk about something other than him?"

And there it was, the reason for the clenched jaw and surly attitude—Father Rafael Vitale.

"Sure, you got a topic in mind?"

Alessio's eyes found mine in the shadows. "Yeah. How about your journalist? And don't tell me there's nothing going on there."

Of course he went right back to *that* topic. He was the king of deflection.

"Tell me, are you fixated on what's happening in my love life because you don't have one of your own, or—"

"So you admit it, then." He raised a brow, and I knew there was no use in denying it. Like I'd told Cooper, there were eyes on every inch of Libertine, and if it pertained to any of the Kings, it was usually *this* guy's eyes.

"You saw us, didn't you?"

"On level five? Yeah. So don't even try to play dumb with me."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. On the plus side, at least I'd had the forethought to get Cooper out of there before I had his pants off and my dick inside him.

Something I probably shouldn't think about while on my way to church.

I glanced at my best friend, my brother, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I found myself saying, "I think I'm in trouble with him."

"Oh?"

I rubbed a hand over my jaw and looked up at the rest of the guys chatting amongst themselves. "Have you ever found yourself wanting to let someone in? To talk to someone other than the seven of us about who you are and what you do?"

Alessio stared, and I could've whacked myself upside the head, because of course he had. The only problem was that he wasn't *allowed* to talk to that person the way he wanted to.

"How about we stay focused on you. Do you want that?" he asked.

"I never have before, but lately…"

"Lately?"

"My worlds are colliding. One minute he was a stranger I saved in an alley, and now he's the gorgeous guy sleeping in one of the beds upstairs—"

"A bed you're sharing with him."

"—and asking questions I can't answer."

Alessio looked up at the head of the group where King was chatting with Benoit. "Well, he's gotten past the first hurdle."

"Which is?"

"King. How often has he let a non-vetted *journalist* into Libertine?"

"Never."

"Exactly. So maybe he sees *that*, sees that you're looking for more here, and now that *he's* happy, he's of the frame of mind to give you a chance to be, too."

I snorted, the thought almost ludicrous after the last dressing-down I'd received from King. "I doubt it. The last few times we've talked, he's—"

"Given you everything you asked for. Does that sound like our normal hardass leader? Usually he'd tell you to pull your head in and send this guy on his way."

I thought about that for a second, and just as I was about to respond, I heard up ahead, "Let's go, you two—we're here."

Alessio took in a deep, fortifying breath, and then we headed inside through the secret entrance to St. Andrews. It had been unlocked in anticipation of our arrival, same time every month, and the sanctuary never failed to stun our group into silence.

St. Andrews was one of the city's oldest and most revered Catholic churches, a gothic revival masterpiece with towering spires and stained glass that even I could admit was breathtaking. I hadn't grown up in church, and I couldn't say I'd go now if it weren't for these midnight confessionals.

Father Vitale sat in a pew near the confessional, a book in hand, but when he caught sight of us, he set it aside and rose to welcome us.

He always seemed too young for a priest, but then, I didn't know many. I'd always pictured them as old and wise, not fair-haired and ridiculously

attractive. He towered over King, who was the first to greet him, then the rest of us joined except for Alessio, who nodded at the priest and then made his way toward the altar cross to light a candle.

Stubborn ass.

"Evening, gentlemen," Father Vitale greeted us with his usual warm smile, and if he'd noticed Alessio's snub, he didn't let it bother him.

"Evening, father," King said. "Thank you for accommodating us, as always."

As strange as it was, Father Vitale could've easily fit in with our crowd —if one was to remove the Roman collar and wash all our sins away.

"At this stage I think it would feel off if I *didn't* have one of these late night sessions with all of you." His eyes swept over our group, and considering some of the things he'd heard over the years, it was shocking there was no judgment there.

Me? I would've been judging the hell out of us.

"We wouldn't miss it," King said, and turned to the rest of us. "Who's up first?"

Everyone's eyes immediately turned to me, and I couldn't really blame them. I had been causing the most chaos this month.

"Lachlan?" Father Vitale's voice was gentle, as though he were coaxing a wild animal closer. "Would you like to come with me?"

As he turned toward the confessional booth, I glared at my brothers. "Really?"

When they all stayed suspiciously quiet, I followed in the footsteps of the good father and tried to think of a way out of this. When no miracle escape plan appeared, however, it seemed I would have to just suck it up.

I opened the door and slipped inside, and as I knelt in front of the lattice partition, Father Vitale said, "May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy."

"Amen," I muttered, and then took in a deep breath. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. It's been twenty-nine days since my last confession."

I paused and thought about my next words carefully, because while I knew what I *should* be confessing, I wasn't quite sure I could get the words out.

"These past couples of weeks I might've done a few things I…need to atone for."

I was still for a moment, wondering where I should begin. The logical place to start was the alley, but did I really need to confess to knocking off a few drug dealers? I would've thought that was doing God's work.

"Continue, my friend—unburden yourself."

"Uh, yeah, so, um, a few weeks back I was assigned to trail these pieces of shi—unsavory sorts who are dealing some really nasty drugs that have been sending people to the morgue. Anyway, things were going along nice and smooth until out of nowhere this innocent bystander showed up."

An image of Cooper flashed through my mind, his wide blue eyes full of fear as he knelt on the ground, the barrel of a gun pointed at his head.

"I see, and what happened when this man or woman…?"

"It was a man."

"What happened when this man showed up?"

"Everything went to shit."

Father Vitale said nothing in response to that, but as my mind replayed the carnage that had followed, I couldn't find it in me to feel bad. Not when I had saved Cooper's life.

"They threatened to kill him. I made sure that didn't happen."

There, that was an accurate enough assessment without going into the gory details.

"So you saved him."

"Yeah, I guess I did."

Silence fell as I stared through the lattice at Father Vitale's profile. It was angular and strong, as though it had been cut from stone, and the shadows that concealed him only amplified the mystery surrounding him.

He had a powerful presence that was almost otherworldly, and sometimes when he looked at you, it was difficult to remember he was a mere mortal.

Touched by God indeed.

"But you're troubled by this?" he asked.

"No. He needed help, so I helped him, but then…then I kind of lied to him. And I'm not proud about that."

"Did you lie to protect him?"

No, I lied to fuck him.

Somehow I didn't think that would go down too well with a priest.

"Not exactly. I wanted to make sure he was okay after what happened, so I followed him, and then things got complicated and I had to tell him I

was someone I'm not so he would call me for protection, and anyway, long story short, I lied to him and feel bad about it."

"Do you plan to tell him you lied?"

"Um—eventually?"

"Why not sooner?"

"Because it's not safe yet."

"So you lied to keep him safe?"

"Yes."

"While lying itself is not something I condone, if it's done to keep one out of harm's way I can see why someone might do it, and I'm sure you will rectify the issue when you are able."

"Yeah—I mean, yes. Of course, just not…yet." I let out a sigh, and just as I was about to wrap things up and give my apologies to the Almighty for my sins, I instead heard myself say, "Father?"

"Yes, Lachlan?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Lately I've found myself butting heads with the bossman."

"I assume you mean King?"

"Yeah." I lowered my head, trying to make sense of my thoughts. I'd always been an impulsive guy, especially when it came to getting down in the thick of it. But I wasn't usually the type to buck the system. If King issued an order, I followed it, no questions asked.

So why had I been getting in so much damn trouble lately?

"I've been conflicted over doing the right thing."

"The right thing or the expected thing?"

Up until now, I'd figured that was one and the same. "The expected, I guess. I've been spending time getting to know someone that I know I shouldn't be. Someone that will, in all likelihood, be gone from my life this time next month, and yet I can't seem to stop myself. Even though King has told me several times to cut it out."

"You're drawn to him."

Father Vitale's words caught me off guard as I stared through the screen, and this time, instead of seeing his profile, I could've sworn he was staring right at me.

"Yes."

"This is the same man you saved?"

I opened my mouth to deny it, but then reminded myself whom I was talking to. “Yes. I know things are too complicated to be with him, and yet I can’t seem to make myself stay away.”

Father Vitale nodded and looked away, once again giving me his stoic profile. “Sometimes God presents us with difficult choices. Ones that test us, tempt us, and make us examine our lives. What you have to ask yourself is *why* you feel guilty about being with this man.”

“It’s not so much about being with him. But wanting to share parts of my life, the parts that aren’t just mine, with someone I shouldn’t.”

“Will sharing those parts hurt anyone? Will it hurt you? Or will living *without* him hurt more?”

As the question lingered in the air, I thought back to the gorgeous man I’d left in my bed, the one who’d come to this city to find justice for his friend, and I couldn’t imagine Cooper going out of his way to hurt anyone, let alone me.

The real question was, would my fellow kings believe that?

“Thank you, father,” I said. “This is all I can remember. I am sorry for these and all my sins.”

“I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. You are to say five Hail Marys as penance for your lies and give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. Go in peace, Lachlan.”

I nodded and said, “Amen,” before getting to my feet and leaving the booth.

A quick scan of the church placed Alessio in a pew on the opposite side of the aisle. I passed by my fellow brothers who were waiting for their turn with the priest and noticed the clenched fists resting on my best friend’s thighs.

As always, Alessio said nothing as I sat beside him, and I knew better than to even try to open up a conversation. Instead, we waited in silence, as one by one each of our brothers confessed their sins and emerged from the booth.

Once everyone was through and had joined us in the pew, Father Vitale exited and made his way over to us.

“You think God built him that tall so he could talk to him better?” Benoit asked, and Lucien snorted.

“That or he was just showing off.”

We all got to our feet as Father Vitale stopped by the group, and when his eyes fell to Alessio, everyone suddenly tensed.

“Alessio, will you be giving confession this evening?”

Alessio’s eyes cut to the priest’s, and the usual humor that sparked in their depths was more like a flat, emotionless void, as he said, “Not tonight,” just like every other night.

Father Vitale inclined his head, gracious as always despite Alessio’s surliness, then smiled at the rest of us. “Then I’ll say goodnight, and will look forward to seeing you next month.”

“Thank you, father,” King said. “We’ll see you then.”

As we turned and started up the aisle toward the secret passageway we’d entered through, I leaned in to my friend and said under my breath, “One of these days, you’re going to have to forgive him.”

I held open the door for Alessio, and as he passed through he looked me dead in the eye and said, “Yeah? Well, today is not that fucking day.”

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27

COOPER

"YOU HAVE GOT to be kidding me," I protested, staring at the blindfold in Lachlan's hand. "I thought we were done with those."

"You thought wrong."

"But you gave me a tour. I already saw everything."

Lachlan smirked. "Did you?"

God, this man had secrets upon secrets. Every time I thought I was getting somewhere with him, he threw up a hand and said, "Hold my beer."

So why did all that mystery intrigue me to no end and somehow make me want to get even closer?

He motioned for me to turn around, and I sighed and relented.

"I already met King," I reminded him. "He's the one who told me I had to be at this meeting."

"I'm aware."

The world went dark as he tied the blindfold on, securing it tight.

"Don't forget that anything or anyone you see is confidential, per the terms of your NDA."

Any*one*? Now that piqued my interest. "Understood," I said. "I'm not looking to fork out a billion dollars for betraying your secrets."

Instead of holding me by the arm the way he had when I was blindfolded before, Lachlan reached for my hand and placed it around his bicep. It was a closer, more intimate move, and I took full advantage, squeezing those powerful muscles that were always hidden beneath suits.

“Careful,” he murmured. “Keep touching me like that, and we won’t be leaving.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“It is if you want to be on the other side of King’s wrath.”

That had me stilling my hand. I didn’t know much about the guy I’d met yesterday, but in those few moments with him, I’d known beyond a shadow of a doubt he wasn’t someone you messed with. And Lachlan seemed to agree.

“Better get a move on,” I said, tugging on Lachlan’s arm, and he let out a low chuckle before moving.

The elevator I recognized. But once we got off, I was led through what felt like a maze. It might’ve been just a way to keep me disoriented, so I couldn’t retrace my steps.

The first thing I noticed was that the air turned cooler, though I felt flickering warmth on my face every few feet. I inched closer to Lachlan, keeping a tight hold on him. I could say all day it was because I needed his guidance, but I had a feeling he knew exactly why I wanted him close.

I also had a feeling he wanted me there too.

We stopped suddenly, and I heard something large and loud yawn open, and then we were walking again. The sound of male voices grew louder with every step we took, and I knew when we’d finally arrived because someone cursed and then the room went silent.

Dead silent.

“Lachlan.” Whoever spoke made Lachlan’s name sound like a warning.

“This is King’s doing,” Lachlan said. “If you don’t like it, take it up with him.”

“This should’ve gone to a vote. He’s an outsider—”

“Who’s been crucial to nailing Mick. Get the fuck over it.”

Electricity hummed in my veins. I couldn’t even see who the players were, but I could already notice an interesting dynamic between them.

Wait, was the blindfold coming off at all? Or would I be in the dark for this meeting? I’d forgotten to ask.

“Enough.” This deep voice I recognized immediately. King had arrived.

“King, you can’t seriously think this is a good idea,” the man objecting to my presence said.

“It’s done.”

“I strongly urge you to reconsider.”

“Noted. And denied.”

A long, tense silence fell, and I held my breath. I wanted to see what was happening, but I tamped down my curiosity, or tried to. We were here for something bigger than whatever problems the man had with me.

Suddenly, the blindfold was removed, and I blinked as my eyes adjusted.

One by one six faces came into view. Some people were instantly recognizable—*holy shit, is that the son of the former U.S. president? The Prince of Monaco?*—and some I’d never seen in my life, but they were clearly of the utmost importance to be standing in the same room as fucking *royalty*.

And by some crazy-ass coincidence, so now was I.

“This is insane,” Shepard O’Neil Winchester III said, and I couldn’t disagree. The fact I was standing in a room with one of the most—if not *the* most—recognizable faces in America was one hundred percent insanity.

But here I was, and from what I could see, there wasn’t one security guy in—

My eyes shifted to Lachlan. *He* was the security in here, and likely out there in the real world. All their connections were in house.

“I told you,” King snapped without taking his eyes off me. “Your grievances are noted. But this is my decision.”

“Are you sure it’s the right one, *mon cher*?” one of the men I didn’t recognize asked. “This is a risky move.”

“Then let’s make sure it’s one that pays off.” King looked to the long-haired guy seated at the end of the table they stood around. His legs were kicked up on top of it like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Cooper is joining us today because *Alessio* was finally able to work out what the key card is for.”

My interest in the men watching me like hawks was suddenly put on the back burner as what King had said registered. They’d worked out what the key card was for? Where it went? What it opened? This was what I’d been waiting for, the next step toward getting justice for Alex, and the fact they’d brought me in…

I looked to Lachlan, whose eyes were locked on me.

This was all him. I wasn’t sure how I knew, but I did. He’d somehow convinced King to let me be here for this reveal, to let me be involved in this moment, and had we not been standing in a room full of men who

looked like they wanted to toss me out on my ass, I might have thrown myself into his arms and never let him go.

"So are you waiting for a drum roll?" Lucien—the only familiar person to me—joked, clapping the Alessio guy on the shoulder. "Or you going to tell us?"

"Actually…" Alessio drew his feet off the table and stood, aiming a remote at the massive TV hanging on the wall. "I'm going to show you instead."

Lachlan placed a hand on my shoulder and said by my ear, "You okay?"

Unable to contain my excitement, I turned and flashed him a wide smile. "Better than okay. This is exactly what I've been waiting for."

"I know." Lachlan squeezed me gently and gestured back to the screen. "So take a look."

Up flashed several different images.

"It's a shipping warehouse," Alessio said as he moved toward the TV. "At the Riverside Dock. The company ownership is forged and security around the place is tight, but that key card right there—" He pointed to the card sitting on the table. The one I'd accidentally scooped up in the alley. "That's our way in."

King walked closer to the screen, his hands clasped behind his back. "These the best angles you've got?"

"With what's out there, yes. But this is one of the old warehouses. This dock isn't super active, so security isn't a top priority down there these days. It's used by smaller, private boats, and I'm guessing Mick's are the type to roll in late at night."

"And how do you propose we get inside if we can't see the front door—or *any* door, for that matter?"

My eyes shifted to the last person I expected to hear talking about breaking and entering a drug dealer's warehouse—the Prince of Monaco.

Alessio shrugged. "We need to get a closer look. Look for blind spots. Check out what kind of security Mick has watching this place. If he's having drugs moved through here, you can bet he's got some sort of muscle patrolling."

The way these guys were talking told me that (a) they'd done this before and (b) they had no doubt they could pull off whatever plan they came up with. But there was something I couldn't seem to work out.

"Who *are* you people?"

Every single person stopped talking and turned in my direction.

Shit. Did I say that out loud?

"We aren't anyone, remember?" King said. "Your NDA states you have seen and met nobody inside these walls."

"Right. Of course. Sorry."

I couldn't be sure, but I thought King's lips twitched.

Lachlan stepped forward. "I could go down and—"

"No," King said. "You are to stay here with Cooper. If we need to send anyone, it'll be Alessio."

Lachlan's jaw bunched, the idea of being held on a leash not sitting well with him. Or maybe it was the idea of babysitting me.

"I could get more cameras down there," he said.

"I said no. We can't risk Mick's men getting jumpy. If they spot someone sniffing around, they might change the date or time—"

"I wouldn't get caught."

"How about we send up a couple of drones?" Alessio interjected, clearly trying to defuse the situation. "They can check out the surrounding buildings, and they'd be less likely to be detected."

"*Or*," Lachlan said, "I could slip in and out the way I said. A drone can get caught."

Alessio scoffed. "I'm taking offense to that, just so you know."

"Lachlan?" Everyone's attention turned to King. "You stay put."

"I don't think he's learned his commands yet." The freakin' Prince of Monaco winked at Lachlan, and I couldn't stop gaping at him. Was I supposed to bow? What did you do in front of royalty?

But King had made it clear whoever these men were outside these walls, they were something altogether different inside, and I was dying to know what part Theodore Rinaldi played in all of this.

Stop staring before they kick you out.

"Right," King said, "Alessio, get your drones in the sky and get us the up-to-date visuals we need so we can formulate a plan."

"On it," Alessio said, shooting King a salute.

"Since you've all determined you want to be involved in the takedown, stick close to the city." He was looking at Theo specifically. "Estimated time is end of the week, and once we get the call, there will be no waiting around for you."

Everyone nodded their agreement, and the interest and excitement was palpable, like they all couldn't wait to get in on some action.

I was living in the fucking Twilight Zone.

"Cooper," King said, and gave a curt nod. "Good work."

Why was it a compliment from a practical stranger had me feeling like a badass? Sheer luck had put the key card in my possession, but being in the right place at the right time was smart on my part.

Damn, who would've thought a week ago I'd say that night in the alley was actually the right place and right time? Not me.

Something like hope filled my chest as Lachlan tied the blindfold back around my eyes. These guys were going to get justice for Alex, I could feel it. Finally the people responsible would pay for what they'd done, and it would prevent so many more unnecessary deaths.

It wasn't until we were heading back to the penthouse that the question entered my mind of just *how* this eclectic group of men planned to make them pay.

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LACHLAN

THIS WAS BULLSHIT.

I didn't bother objecting to King again. There was no point. He wanted me locked away while the plans were made, but why? I'd been in situations that would make his head spin, and he thought I couldn't handle a simple scoping out of a location?

Again with the bullshit.

My eyes drifted to where Cooper poured himself a drink.

The resentment rising inside me wasn't directed at him, but at the situation, because being tied down and unable to do the thing I was best at wasn't going to work for me.

Telling me to "stay put"?

Fuck. That.

"Thirsty?" Cooper asked, still holding the bottle of soda.

I shook my head as I paced restlessly, staring out through the open curtains at the city below. From here, we faced the general direction of the warehouse, and wasn't *that* just going to annoy the shit out of me?

Cooper sat on one side of the couch and leaned back casually, but there was nothing indifferent about his energy. He was so full of questions and comments that he was ready to pop. How could he not be after what he'd just seen?

I cracked my neck from side to side, trying to release some of the tension building up inside me, but it didn't help.

“So, that was an intense meeting,” Cooper said, hoping to open up a conversation I wasn’t in the mood for.

It was a comment that didn’t require a response, though, so I let him talk while my mind began to run through how I was going to sweep the warehouse and get what we needed.

“Obviously, I won’t say anything outside this room, but holy shit, I have to at least say it once. I was just in the same room as Shepard O’Neil Winchester III—like, he’s American royalty. And don’t even get me started on the fact that you’re friends with an actual prince.” He shook his head. “That’s wild. You have to admit it.”

I heard his words, could even acknowledge his point of view was right, but I was already deep in planning mode, orders be damned. Being cooped up in this building for days already had me feeling caged, and I needed an outlet or I was going to go out of my mind.

“So do you think I’ll be able to play a part when it all goes down?” Cooper asked. “I mean, I know nothing major, but I’d like to help get these assholes behind bars.”

I almost snorted at that. *Behind bars…* That wasn’t my preferred method of dealing with the garbage in this city, or anywhere else in the world. King would likely have a problem with that too for this particular mission, though I’d never been discouraged from unleashing my own brand of justice before.

“You’ve done enough,” I said.

“Oh.” He paused for a moment. “Well, if I can, I’d like to be there.”

“Of course you would. It’s dangerous—where else would you want to be?”

Cooper’s forehead creased at the caustic edge to my words. “Are you okay?”

Fucking perfect. I felt like a ticking time bomb ready to explode, and if I stayed here another second I’d end up taking Cooper down with me. That was the last thing I wanted to do.

Decision made, I headed for the door and called out, “I’ll be back.”

“Lachlan—” Worry laced Cooper’s voice, but I didn’t stick around to hear him ask where I was going and why. He didn’t need to know. Didn’t need to be complicit in my plans.

I punched the button for the elevator, and the doors opened like it knew I need to get the fuck out.

Seconds later I was on the ground floor grabbing my coat, then I was out the door. The cold air slapped me in my face as I stepped out onto the street, and when one of the drivers on hand got out of the car, I waved him off.

“Not tonight,” I said, jamming my hands into my pockets, then I started up the street.

God it felt good to be outside again. Not that it was a hardship to spend time at Libertine, but being cooped up in there for several days in a row had left me feeling antsy.

I didn’t do well in enclosed spaces, and when it was against my will, it was even worse.

Maybe this was King’s way of paying me back for these last couple of weeks. I definitely deserved it. But even he knew the consequences of caging one who usually roamed free.

I booked it several blocks, running over everything we’d uncovered in the last few days, and I had to admit that without Cooper we probably wouldn’t be as close to nailing Mick as we were as of tonight.

Not only had he led us to the club where I’d managed to secure a deal with Mick, but that fateful night in the alley had gotten us more intel than we could’ve hoped for. That key card he’d “accidentally” come across had cut weeks of surveillance off low-end drug deals and instead led us straight to the source.

I turned down a side street, one I knew would knock a little time off my trek across town, and made my way toward the one place I’d been specifically told not to go.

But since when had I ever followed orders?

King couldn’t just dangle a plan in front of me and then tell me to sit and wait while the rest of them worked out the details. I was the security guy, for fuck’s sake. The one sent *in* to execute the plan. So this sidelining of me felt fucking petty, even for him.

As I turned back onto one of the main thoroughfares, I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, someone making the same move, out of the side street and back onto the main, and while I wasn’t deliberately trying to stay hidden, if I found out King had set a tail on me, I couldn’t be held responsible for what I would do.

I quickened my pace, deciding to see if my sixth sense was on point—and sure enough, when I crossed the street, so did my new shadow. This had

to be some kind of joke, right? King wasn't dumb enough to think I wouldn't notice someone following me. That was literally what I'd trained for, to follow people and know when *I* was being followed. That was the only way to be effective in my line of work.

When I spotted several stores with glass fronts, I decided to see who he'd sent to do his dirty work. Maybe I'd even snap a selfie with his guy so poorly trailing my ass over my shoulder, and send it as a reminder of my actual skills. But when I caught sight of a gorgeous face I'd recently committed to memory, I almost lost my footing.

Fucking Cooper.

Of course he'd followed me.

Which meant he'd not only ignored the rule about staying inside Libertine, but he'd also walked out the front door without a goddamn blindfold, meaning he now knew the exact location of the place.

Well, if King had been sidelining me for my previous transgressions, he just might kill me for this one.

What the hell did Cooper think he was doing? Following me? It was almost laughable, really, considering how the two of us had begun. The only difference was, I knew he was there behind me. In the coffee shop, he'd been absolutely clueless I'd been trailing him for days, that *I* was his masked man in the alley, on his fire escape…in his bedroom that night.

So maybe it was time to teach him a lesson.

I continued on, not alerting him to the fact I knew he was there. Going to the warehouse now was out of the question, because there was no way I was letting him get close to that place.

At the next corner I made a right, walked a block, then took another right. If he wanted to be nosy and get his steps in, I'd work his ass out. It was bitterly cold today, not the kind most people could handle for too long, but Cooper kept pace, following me through all the twists and turns.

He was persistent, I'd give him that. Usually that was something I admired in a person, but at this moment I wanted to tie him up and take all my frustration out on that hot, rebellious body.

At the next side street, I made a left, moved into the alcove of a storefront, and waited. A few seconds later, Cooper followed, but confusion crossed his face when he didn't see me up ahead. He walked faster, and that was when I made my move—I darted out of the shadows, grabbed him from behind, and covered his mouth to keep him quiet.

His entire body seized, going rigid, and a muffled sound came out of him as I shoved him toward the brick wall.

Cooper was breathing hard, and I hoped for one goddamn second this made him think twice about putting himself in such reckless situations in the future. I didn't have high hopes for that, considering his penchant for trouble, but maybe he'd surprise me.

"Did you really think you could follow me and I wouldn't know?"

Instantly, his shoulders relaxed, and I wanted to curse at the fact that I had that effect on him. Did I like it? Yeah, I fucking did. And I didn't need to.

Irritation had me spinning him around to face me. Those blue eyes met mine, and it was a good thing he was still showing some alarm or I would've considered getting his head examined.

"What the fuck are you doing, Cooper?"

"I… You didn't answer me before you left."

"I didn't *answer* you?" I lowered my head, shoving my face in close to his. "You're here, sneaking around in the shadows, because I didn't *answer* you?"

He licked at his lip nervously. "Well, yes. So much happened tonight, and instead of talking to me you just left."

"So you decided to follow me."

"I wanted to make sure that you were all right. That nothing bad happened to you."

He had to be joking, right? He was out here following *me* around in case I got into trouble? Now that was a laugh.

"And what exactly did you plan to do if something bad *did* happen? I'm supposed to be looking after you, remember?" I gritted my teeth, frustration riding me as the image of Cooper with a gun to his head flashed before my eyes. "You're the one whose apartment was tossed, the one who stumbled on a drug deal gone wrong. Your self-preservation instincts suck."

"Yeah?" Cooper shocked the hell out of me, shoving me hard in the chest. "Well, I'm sorry I give a shit."

"No, you're not. You're just sorry you got caught." I shoved a hand through my hair and turned away from him. "And now you've fucked up my plans."

"Which were what, exactly? To go to the one place you were told not to?"

I whirled on him and took a step forward so Cooper's back was against the brick wall again. "That's none of your business."

"It is if it means you could get hurt."

My chest tightened at his words, warmth flooding me at the emotions I could see swirling in those blue eyes of his, the sincerity in his voice—and *that* just pissed me off even more.

How dare he put himself in danger, for *me*?

I grabbed his shirt and pulled him in close. "*You* were supposed to stay at Libertine."

If Cooper was intimidated by me in any way, he sure didn't show it. "So were you."

I sighed and let him go, irritated. This was getting us nowhere, and since my plan was now shot to shit, the best thing I could do was get him somewhere safe.

I grabbed his arm and pulled him out into the main street.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I was too annoyed to deal with conversation now. Anything I did say would likely get me in trouble.

"Are we going back to Libertine?"

The fact that we were indeed going back to the club without any subterfuge or visual impairment because he now knew where it was—that was a whole other fuck-up I wasn't even going to think about right now. Otherwise I might just turn around and strangle him myself.

Ever since I'd laid eyes on Cooper, he'd been nothing but trouble. But apparently trouble was exactly what I'd been looking for, because I couldn't get him out of my fucking mind.

Annoyed by that little revelation, I took the necessary turns and side streets to get us back to Libertine.

"Should I shut my eyes?" Cooper said as we rounded the final turn, and I glared at him over my shoulder.

"No fucking point now, is there?"

"You know, you're a real grump when you don't get your way. That's interesting."

I grunted, figuring that was better than telling him what I thought *he* was right now.

"Oh, for God's sake, I signed an NDA. It's not like I'm going to post the address somewhere."

I marched up to the nondescript door and banged on it a little harder than necessary.

The narrow panel slid open and our doorman saw me, then unlocked the door.

Cooper trailed in after me, and as the door shut behind us, I whirled around on him.

“Do yourself a favor. Go back up to the room.”

“Is that where *you’re* going?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about where I’m going or what I’m doing.”

“Why? You’re so concerned with *my* whereabouts.”

“Because you lack the ability to keep yourself out of danger. You run toward it, and for someone like you, that’s going to be a death sentence.”

“Someone like me? Wow. You really think highly of me, don’t you?”

That was half the problem—I thought *too* highly of him.

“What I *think* is that if you can’t stay inside the walls of this building, I will lock you back up in that penthouse where I know you won’t get into any trouble.”

“Trouble? What am I, a five-year-old?”

Christ he was stubborn. He’d literally come to me for help, called my goddamn number because he had drug dealers up his ass, and now he was arguing with me about his safety?

“You know what? Fuck it.” I marched over to the elevator and punched the button, and when the doors opened, I stepped inside. “If you want to leave, go for it. But just know I won’t be there to save you again.”

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COOPER

SAVE ME *AGAIN*? When else did he—

Oh. He had to mean in the club with Mick.

I gripped the back of my neck and looked around, but for once I wasn't feeling quite so curious. Lachlan taking off, leaving me here, gave me the perfect excuse to go wherever I wanted, explore inside or outside of this place. Eavesdrop on the members milling around. Ask questions. Satisfy the part of me that always wanted to lift the veil on things and see what was hiding underneath.

Only now all I could do was stare at the place Lachlan had disappeared to. I hadn't been finished with our conversation when he abruptly left, and now that I knew he thought he had to constantly "save" me like I was some helpless kid, I was ready to give him a piece of my mind.

I'm not *fucking* helpless. *And he doesn't get to just walk away. He's not the only one feeling stuck, for crying out loud.*

With every second that passed, there was a rising need to go after him, even though I had no clue where he'd gone. Shit, maybe I'd just stop on every floor until I found him.

The only thing that made me pause was the thought that he could be on the fifth floor. The sex club floor.

It would make sense. He was pissed off, frustrated, and I'd felt all that tension directed my way. Even when he was upset, there was no denying the sexual undertone that laced every interaction between us. What if he'd decided to use that and take it out on someone else?

My stomach rolled, the thought making me physically ill.

No. He wouldn't do that. Would he? He could. It wasn't like we were dating or anything. We'd just been hooking up while we were in this crazy situation together.

And getting to know each other.

And I was realizing how much more I wanted to know and just be around him.

Shit. I was getting in too deep already, and I couldn't stomach the thought of him with anyone else. Or even the fact that he'd shut down and wouldn't talk to me.

Or, worst of all, that he thought I was some incapable guy who couldn't possibly handle any real-world situation without needing a savior.

That had my blood pressure climbing, and I shot toward the elevator. Before I could decide which floor I wanted to go to first, a towering figure in shitkicker boots stepped into the entryway, blocking the doors.

With long, dark hair and crossed, muscular arms on full display, I recognized the intimidating figure as one of the men who had been at King's meeting. Alessio.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I glanced behind me, assuming he was addressing someone else, but I was the only one in here.

I narrowed my eyes and waited for him to step inside, but he just kept blocking the door. "You wouldn't do what?"

"Cooper, right?" Alessio said, even though I knew he was fully aware of who I was. "Let me give you some advice. Steer clear of the raging bull for a few hours."

"By that, I'm assuming you mean Lachlan."

"Smart guy."

"No, apparently I'm helpless, haven't you heard?" I snapped.

Alessio whistled low and held his hands up, and I thought it odd he wore a silver cross necklace. He didn't strike me as the religious type.

"Don't shoot the messenger," he said. "Just making sure you don't end up in pieces."

"Pretty sure I can handle Lachlan's bad mood."

He chuckled. "You know, I think you actually believe that."

Irritation burned through my veins, hot and fast, and though I would probably end up regretting it, I couldn't stop myself from saying, "Look,

are you coming or going? Because I'm really not in the mood for games."

Alessio raised a brow and then slowly smirked. "Ah. I get it now." He stepped back, held up three fingers, and said, "Good luck."

The doors slid closed then, and I blinked, wondering what the hell just happened. But he'd given me the answer in the end, so I couldn't really hold anything against him.

I pushed the button for the third floor and stared at my reflection in the shine of the doors. My skin was pink from the cold, and my hair was more than a little windswept, but I didn't have it in me to care at the moment. I was too busy trying to remember what was on the third floor, because it wasn't like Lachlan had given me a map during the tour.

At least I knew it wasn't the sex club, which was a relief I didn't want to think too long on.

The doors opened, and I should've known Lachlan would take out his frustration here. With the way he was built, so strong but not brawny, it made sense he'd chosen the club's gym over anywhere else in the building.

I couldn't even call it a gym—it was more like an athletic club, so vast it took up the entire floor, which didn't make finding him quick. I scanned each section, including the free weights, where I assumed he'd be, but it wasn't until I reached a studio filled with hanging punching bags that I found him beating the shit out of one.

He hadn't bothered changing, still wearing his suit pants, but he'd gotten rid of everything covering his torso, and sweat gleamed off his muscles as he punched the bag.

Damn he was a sight to see. So much so I almost forgot why I'd followed him up here in the first place.

His back rippled with each blow to the bag, the force behind each punch enough to send a mere human to the ground.

I stayed silent, mesmerized by the display of strength as he pummeled the bag with a ferocity I hadn't expected. The power behind each hit and kick must've taken years of training and practice to master, until he finally got to a point where his arms protested under the fury.

It was one of the sexiest things I'd seen in my life, and despite my irritation over what happened earlier, my body was not immune to what I'd just witnessed.

Lachlan's back heaved with his heavy breathing as he stilled the bag, and when he turned to move back into place, his eyes fell on me.

Oh sweet Jesus. He looked like he wanted to throttle me, and it was in that moment I realized that maybe Lachlan was right. I did like to run toward danger—right now, all I wanted to do was go to him and climb his body like a goddamn tree.

"What are you doing here? I told you to go upstairs," he barked, snapping me back to reality.

Or at least a reality where my dick was a little less excited to see him.

"And the last time I checked, I had permission to go where the fuck I want to in here."

Lachlan raised a brow at my feisty clapback, and when he took a step forward, I immediately took one back.

A savage smirk curled Lachlan's lips as though he was happy he'd just made me retreat a step. He probably thought he was proving a point—and if *that* didn't chap my ass and make me remember why I'd tracked him down here in the first place, nothing would.

I stormed forward, common sense be damned, and when I was close enough that I could feel the heat emanating off Lachlan's body, I jabbed a hard finger into that perfect, sweat-sheened chest of his.

"*I* am not some helpless guy that *you* need to save."

Lachlan slowly lowered his eyes to the finger I was poking him with, and just as I was about to pull it back, his hand whipped up and took hold of my wrist.

Quicker than I could blink, he spun me around and pulled me back against him, trapping me in place. "Aren't you?"

"No," I said as I struggled against his hold, and Lachlan's wicked chuckle told me he didn't believe that for a second.

"From where I'm standing, you seem pretty helpless to me."

"You caught me off guard."

"No." Lachlan nipped at my ear. "I just caught you, which means the only way you're going to escape…is if I let you."

My body instantly responded to the raspy threat, my desire now deeply ingrained with being restrained and taken, it would seem. I shoved back into Lachlan, trying to gain some control of the situation, but the feel of his stiff cock pressed up against my ass had me hard.

"Not even going to try?" he said, his breath on my neck causing me to shiver.

For a second, I forgot what he was referring to, because my body had a mind of its own, but then I realized that wasn't going to prove my point. To show him that I wasn't helpless.

Even though when it came to wanting him inside me, he might be right.

I angled my neck to the side, wanting his mouth to follow so I could catch him off guard, and when he did just that, I ducked down fast to get out of his hold.

Or should I say *tried*, because Lachlan's hold on me was unrelenting, and I didn't get farther than a few inches.

"Really, Cooper? That's all you've got?"

It sounded like he was disappointed, like he was hoping I'd fight him back, and that fueled my adrenaline.

Helpless, my ass.

With all my might, I pushed out of his arms and turned around to face him.

That was a mistake. Seeing him looking the way he did, so sweaty and sexy, had me wanting to run toward him instead of away.

He began to slowly circle the edge of the mat. Like he was stalking me, waiting for the right moment to attack.

But then he stopped, lifted his arm, and beckoned me.

Lachlan wanted *me* to attack.

Oh shit.

I looked him over, trying to find a weak spot, but that was impossible. The man didn't have any. He was primed and ready, all muscle and fierce, unforgiving strength. I was only able to get away before because he let me, and now he wanted me to throw myself at his mercy?

No problem. I was nothing if not reckless.

I shoved my sleeves up my arms and readied myself for the attack. Game on.

Letting him get his arms around me would be a problem, so I decided to aim lower. I wasn't a fighter, but I'd love to knock Lachlan on his ass just to prove I could.

Rushing him, I aimed for his legs to push him off balance, but I only managed to make him lose a few inches, as he stayed upright.

Goddamn, what was he, a brick wall?

Jerking back, already breathing hard at the effort, I was pondering my next move when Lachlan leapt toward me. I immediately took several steps

back, but it was a fake-out, and he smirked.

That reaction pissed me off.

Jaw clenched, I ran toward him and shoved him back with both hands as hard as I could, and he braced himself against me with his forearm. I charged him again and again, each time at a different angle, trying to find any way I could to tackle his ass. He easily batted me away the first few times, but I was unrelenting, and soon, we were sparring. His sweat-slicked skin fucked me up, not giving me anything to hold on to.

“That’s it,” Lachlan growled when I managed to land an elbow to his side to wrestle out of his hold. He caught me again easily.

“Fuck you.” The words ripped out of me in frustration, and I tried one last time to get him on the ground. I almost had him when suddenly, my feet were kicked out from beneath me and I was airborne.

The next thing I knew, I felt strong arms beneath me seconds before my back hit the mat, and then Lachlan was all I could see, standing over me and looking down with a hungry, victorious expression darkening his gaze.

And somehow, I couldn’t even be mad about it.

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LACHLAN

MY CHEST HEAVED as I stared down at Cooper.

Granted, I'd laid him out much gentler than I would others, but I wasn't out to hurt him, just prove a point. He had no idea how deadly this city could be, especially in the places he'd been sniffing around lately. But no matter what I said to him, nothing seemed to be getting through.

So maybe this little demonstration was what had been needed.

It wasn't my original goal when I'd come to the gym. I'd wanted some alone time, time to work off my frustration and calm down. But when Cooper had stepped inside the studio and come at me for trying to protect him, something inside me snapped. His constant habit of putting himself in dangerous situations was driving me fucking crazy.

And so was the way he was looking at me right now.

Where there should be fear, or shock, in those blue eyes, all I could see was a dark desire as they roamed down over my naked chest and stopped at the waist of my pants. That look was trouble, *he* was fucking trouble, and if he was smart, he'd get to his feet and hightail it out of here, putting several doors and floors between us.

I wanted to equal parts punish and pleasure him. I wanted to open his eyes to what could happen when he trusted the wrong person—or stranger slipping through a window—while also protecting him from that very danger.

And wasn't *that* the biggest joke of all—I was worried about Cooper's naivety when it had been the very thing I originally preyed on.

So who was I really trying to protect him from?

Cooper's breathing was coming a little faster now. But what had started out as an emotional kind of frustration had now turned physical.

I should walk away. I should leave him to find his way back to the penthouse and get the hell out of there before I did something stupid. But when he slicked his tongue along his lower lip, my decision was made for me.

I reached for the button on my pants and undid it, and Cooper arched his hips off the mat. That was an invitation if ever I'd seen one. An invitation to come and *really* work out his body.

I unzipped, and he did the same, and by the time I was on my knees at the end of his feet he was shoving his jeans down his hips and I was pulling the denim away. Cooper gasped as the cool air hit his fevered skin, but I didn't give him time to think as I tossed his jeans aside and moved up between his legs.

I planted a hand on either side of his head, using my body to keep him in place, as I hovered over the top of him. "Do you understand now?" I asked, wanting to keep him close but also prove just how easy it was to trap him if he wasn't paying attention.

"That you're an overprotective control freak?"

"When it comes to you, fucking count on it."

"Is that supposed to scare me?" Cooper said as he got his legs out from under me and wrapped them around mine.

"No." My eyes narrowed on his defiant ones. "It's just the way it is."

"And that bothers you?"

"It sure as hell doesn't help me sleep at night." I crushed my mouth to his in an effort to push those complicated feelings aside, but all it did was bring them roaring to the surface.

Flames licked across my skin, spreading heat throughout my body as the first taste of him hit my tongue. Sweet, defiant, and a little salty in attitude and flavor, Cooper reached for the back of my neck and pulled me in closer.

I'd thought the best way to get my aggression out was a couple rounds with the bag. But as my tongue and legs tangled with Cooper's, I realized the best way to ease this brand of frustration was to go a couple rounds with the man who'd caused it.

I swept my tongue around every inch of his delectable mouth, rolling my hips and reveling in the feel of his hard cock aligning with mine.

It had always been like this with us, from the very first time in his apartment to right here, right now. I'd touch him, he'd go up in flames, and then together we would burn until we consumed one another.

The fact he didn't know that, or believed he'd once felt this with someone else, was a whole other side to my frustration I didn't even dare touch, because how could I compete with my fucking self?

I growled and ripped my mouth from his, my need for him too strong as I stared down at the most perfect face I'd ever seen. With soft pink cheeks that matched his swollen wet lips, Cooper pushed every single button I had.

I'd never been the type to get lost in a pretty face. But I couldn't walk away from him now. I was in too deep. I wanted him too much, and no matter how many times I told myself this was temporary, it didn't matter.

I moved up to my knees and ran my eyes down to where his stiff dick was testing the confines of his briefs, and licked my lips.

"Show me your cock."

Cooper bit into his pouty lip and reached into his briefs to pull out his long, veiny erection.

"Mmm." The sound rumbled out of my throat of its accord, the wide, sticky head of his dick a testament to how aroused he was. The sight of it had me rubbing a rough palm over my own aching shaft.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"You can't tell?"

"Not without proof. I showed you mine. Only seems fair that—"

My cock was out and in hand before he could finish his sentence.

"Oh hell." Cooper's hips arched up. "I want that."

I knew Cooper was fired up tonight, but this ballsy attitude was hot as fuck. I gave myself a couple of hard strokes and looked around the empty studio. Just because no one was in here didn't mean there weren't eyes watching. But when Cooper reached for the edge of his sweater to strip it off, my concerns vanished.

He'd forgotten my warning, and when he tossed the sweater aside, I suddenly forgot too.

"Look at you…"

"That's what I want," he said, stretching his arms over his head. "For you to look at me and see that I'm not helpless. I'm not weak. I go after

what I want, and right now, I want you."

My balls throbbed at his bold declaration, then I hooked a finger into the elastic of his briefs and tugged on it. "Then you better get these the fuck out of my way."

Cooper drew his legs up to his chest and slid the scrap of material free, and just as he was about to lower them to the ground, I put a hand on either knee.

"Hell yeah," I muttered. "Keep them up there, just like that."

Cooper's breath was coming a little faster now as I stared down at the erotic picture he made. Positioned as he was, naked and flat on his back with his legs drawn up, his body was open and vulnerable to me. His cock and balls were easily accessible, and that tight little hole I was about to devour, winked at me like it was my lover.

He was my own personal offering, and when I lowered my head to swipe my tongue up the underside of his shaft, Cooper's entire body trembled.

I tapped his leg to get his attention. "Spread these for me."

Cooper pulled his legs into a wide straddle, and I shifted down to my stomach, getting my face in his business.

"Oh, this is going to be fun." With a hand on each thigh I held him in place, then leaned in and sucked one of his balls.

Cooper hissed and bucked against my hold, but I held firm as I swirled my tongue around his heated skin, teasing and tormenting him.

"Lachlan," he said as I lapped at him like a hungry kitten, then moved my attention to both balls. I drew the sensitive skin between my lips and sucked, and Cooper tensed.

He liked that, so I did it again, and again, until he was writhing under me like a man tormented.

I continued my assault, my lips and tongue working overtime until hands twisted in my hair and pulled me up from between his legs.

"My dick, Lachlan," he panted. "I need you to suck my dick."

My lips curled as I lowered my head back down, but instead of going for the tight balls drawn up to his body, I licked from the base of his cock to the tip. Cooper shoved his hips up in an effort to make me hurry, but I was in no rush. I wanted my fill. I wanted to bathe in his scent and savor his taste, and when I swiped my tongue over the head of his cock and got that first burst of flavor, I knew nothing else would ever satisfy.

I reached for his cock and angled it to my lips, then swallowed him in one greedy gulp. Cooper's legs hugged my ears as I devoured him one inch at a time, and when I started to move back down, he tugged on my hair and pleaded with me not to stop.

I grunted, his desperation equal to the voice in my head pleading with me to get inside him already. But I wanted him out of his mind first, and the quickest way to do that was to get my mouth on him.

I licked a path over his sac, bracing my hands on the back of his thighs and shoving his legs back up his chest, then nuzzling my nose in under his balls.

Earthy, manly, and one hundred percent Cooper. The scent made my cock jerk against the mat as I spread his ass cheeks wide and growled at the sight of his hole waiting for me. I leaned in and flicked my tongue over it, then speared it inside.

"Ah… *Fuck.*"

His curse was music to my ears, and I dug my fingers into his soft cheeks and went at him again. I was like a man crazed. I couldn't get enough. But with the way I was feeling, I needed to prep him with more than my tongue.

I stroked my thumb over his hole, gently pushing inside.

"I can't wait until this is my cock," I told him, replacing my thumb with two fingers.

He whimpered, clenching his ass around them. When I leaned down and sucked one of his balls into my mouth, his shout echoed around the empty studio.

"Lachlan…" he begged as I scissored my fingers inside him. "Lachlan, I need more."

"Good," I said, and pulled my fingers free then spat into his stretched hole. "Because you're about to get it."

I reached for his ankles and pulled his legs down, and when his lust-laden eyes found mine, I winked and then flipped him over. Cooper landed with a soft grunt, and I took hold of his hips.

"Hands and knees."

He moved quickly, planting his hands on the mat and pushing up to his knees, bracing himself for what was about to happen.

I shoved my pants and briefs down my legs, then spread those perfect ass cheeks apart.

“God you’re fucking sexy.” I directed the head of my cock toward his waiting body, and Cooper white-knuckled the mat and shoved back.

I growled as my dick disappeared inside him, the white-hot pleasure of his tight ass almost enough to make me shoot my load right then. But it was the promise of an even more explosive finale that made me hang on, that made me grit my teeth and wait for the high I’d get when Cooper exploded with me.

I looked down at where we were joined, then ran my gaze up over his naked body. He was so damn beautiful, and his smooth, unblemished skin beckoned me to mark it in some way.

I slowly pulled out of him, and when Cooper shouted my name, I sank back inside with a thrust so powerful that one of his arms collapsed and he stumbled forward.

I grabbed hold of him and pulled him onto my lap, and he sank down onto my cock and looped an arm back around my neck.

“Damn it.” My dick was so deep inside him now it was hard to know where I ended and he began. “I’ve broken every fucking rule to keep you alive. *Every* rule to keep you close.”

Cooper moaned and arched his back, and I reached down and wrapped a hand around his throbbing dick.

“If you ever put yourself in danger again”—I bucked up, making him cry out—“if anyone ever *hurts* you, I can’t be held responsible for what I would do.”

His fingers tightened at the back of my neck and his hips started to move, and I sank my teeth into his shoulder—marking him, just like I’d wanted to.

“Lachlan… God… That’s it, right there.”

My name on his tongue sounded like a prayer as I licked a path up his neck to his ear. “Right there?”

“Yes.”

“Say it louder.”

“*Yes*.”

“And you’re going to come for me, right here? Right now?”

“Yes… Anything…”

He was exactly where I wanted him.

I wrapped an arm across his shoulders, then powered into him with rapid thrusts, stroking him in rhythm with each punch of my hips. It was

sweaty, messy, and one of the hottest things I'd experienced in my life.

He shook, his cock jerked in my fist, and then Cooper shouted my name as jets of sticky cum sprayed all over the exercise mat. My orgasm clawed at me then, demanding release, and as my vision blurred and I exploded inside of him, all of those feelings I'd been trying to shove aside came crashing to the forefront.

In that moment I knew everything had changed. *I* had changed.

Cooper was no longer just some guy I'd saved in an alley. He was no longer just a means to an end.

Cooper was mine, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with that yet.

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COOPER

IT WAS AMAZING how a night of taking out your frustration inside someone could relax a man, but it had done wonders for Lachlan.

Usually he paced during a work call, but at the moment he was lounged on one end of the couch, his bare feet kicked up on the coffee table as he spoke with the VP of his company.

And how did I know that? Because I'd asked. And he'd answered.

As a matter of fact, he'd been a hell of a lot more chatty, for him at least, and I was taking full advantage of his loosened-up state to get a little closer.

On the other end of the couch, I mimicked his position, only I had my legs spread out along the cushions. At some point during the call, Lachlan rested his arm across my ankles, and that simple move that he probably didn't even realize he'd done tightened my chest.

It felt possessive, made me feel wanted in a way I couldn't ever remember feeling, and that was when realization hit, hard and fast.

I was falling for Lachlan. And I had a crazy thought that he felt the same way, even as he was trying to fight it.

His fingers trailed along the top of my foot absently. "If anything else comes up, I trust you to handle it… That's fine… No, don't contact me for that… Right. I'll be in touch." He ended the call and tossed his cell on the table before leaning back with a sigh.

"A man in demand," I said. "But that's where you thrive, isn't it? Being the boss."

“Not always the boss.”

“Maybe not in name, but you don’t seem to listen much to him either, do you?”

Lachlan snorted out a laugh, surprising me, and I grinned. He knew it was true. Bossy, independent, insubordinate—all things that were blatantly obvious after days with him, but that I couldn’t help but find super hot. Especially when all that protective, dominating energy was focused my way.

Well, maybe I’d had a moment of being pissed that he thought I was some helpless guy he had to take care of, but that had been put to rest pretty damn fast last night.

After all, a guy like Lachlan wouldn’t have anything to do with someone they considered weak. He’d all but spelled that out for me.

“You,” he said, running his thumb along my ankle, “are entirely too observant for your own good.”

“Which gets me in trouble, yeah, yeah, I know. But that’s where you come in, right? When I go too far?”

I was teasing, but I couldn’t help but hold my breath for his response. What if he said he *wouldn’t* always be there? That would tell me he viewed what was happening between us as temporary, and I really didn’t want to hear that.

Instead, he reached for my hand and pulled me forward until I straddled his lap. A strong hand gripped the back of my neck, but his thumb grazed my jaw as dark eyes stared into mine.

“You like to try my patience,” he murmured.

“I didn’t know you had any,” I shot back.

“I have enough to rein you in when need be.”

“And who’s there to rein *you* in? Wait, let me guess.”

Lachlan cocked a brow, waiting for me to take my best shot.

“Alessio,” I finished.

He scoffed and shook his head. “Like I said, you’re far too observant.”

I shrugged off his words, but I had to admit, the compliment made me want to puff out my chest a little. “It wasn’t that hard to figure out.”

“No?”

“No. Down at that meeting when everyone was coming at you, he was the one you looked to for support, and when we got back last night, he, um…”

“He what?”

“He just gave me some advice. He watches out for you. Has your back or six? Isn’t that what they say?”

Lachlan chuckled. “We’re not in the military.”

“I know, but you’re in security. Means the same thing, right?”

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed a fraction. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

“So, how’d you two meet?”

“Through King.”

My lips twitched. “Is that it?”

“Sorry. Did you want more?”

I shoved Lachlan in the shoulder. “More than a two-word answer? I was kind of hoping. But if you can’t tell me about him, how about you? You can talk about yourself, I presume.”

When he pulled a face, I tipped my head back and let out an exasperated sound. “Ugh, talking to you is *so* frustrating. I get you’re in security and have to keep things on the down-low, but can’t you give me something? *Anything?*”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. How’d did you get into security?”

His smirk instantly vanished, and it didn’t take a genius to realize I’d just touched on something unpleasant.

Great job, you nosy bastard. Why didn’t I just shut my mouth and keep things light, fun, and sexy instead of probing for more information?

I was about to change the subject when Lachlan shocked the hell out of me and said, “My parents died.”

That was *not* what I’d expected him to say, but now that he had, I wasn’t quite sure how to reply. The last thing I’d wanted to do was bring up a painful topic, but now that I had inadvertently put my foot in it, I wasn’t sure how to remove it.

“Lachlan, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. When I was a boy.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t the most eloquent response, but it was all I had right then. God, why I couldn’t I ever just enjoy a silence? “You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

His dark eyes found mine, a question of his own now swirling in their depths. “You don’t want to know?”

I did, of course. I wanted to know everything there was to know about him. But I also didn't want to push him into a place he wasn't comfortable talking about.

"Only if you want to tell me."

Lachlan wound his arms around my waist and pulled me down until I was settled against his chest, where the steady beat of his heart thumped beneath my ear.

"I've never told anyone outside of my brothers before, but… I was ten years old when it happened. We lived in a place north of the city, Westchester County. My family came from old money, and life was pretty much perfect as far as I was concerned."

I felt the dread of what was coming settle in the pit of my stomach.

"It was a Tuesday, just a day like any other. My father had been teaching me chess, and I'd challenged him to a game after dinner. I'd just swiped his bishop when the neighbors' dogs began to bark like crazy. I only remember that because my mother came running in, and something about the look on her face had my father getting up. Which, of course, made me want to follow, but my mother wrapped her arms around me from behind while he went to check the security camera."

Lachlan swallowed, and I flexed my hand on his chest, wanting to comfort him.

"I remember we started running… We had a safe room in the house, and she had me go in there, and I thought she would join me, but my father wasn't back yet. She kissed my forehead, told me she loved me. Told me to stay inside no matter what, and that her and my father would be right back."

He went silent, and that was all I needed to fill in the gaps. It made my blood run cold, and like he knew how horrified I was for him, he ran his hand along my back.

"I don't know how long I was in there. I just remember that it was still dark when SWAT came and told me my parents were gone. I didn't find out until much later that it was a home invasion. Some assholes who wanted money and were willing to kill to get it."

"I'm so sorry." It was all I knew to say, yet again, because what else *did* you say to something so horrible? "Where did you go? Did you have anyone?"

"I was shipped off to live with my aunt here in the city."

“Saying ‘shipped off’ doesn’t make it sound like a good thing.”

Lachlan shrugged. “It wasn’t terrible. She was cold, but rich, so I never lacked for anything.”

Except the warmth of his parents’ love. That was enough to ruin anyone’s life, but somehow he’d survived. Hell, more than that—he’d succeeded in ways I couldn’t even fathom.

“I hate that you went through that,” I said softly.

“I’m fine.”

I lifted my head. “But are you really?”

He stared at me for a long moment before his lips curved in a sad smile. “I am.”

“I’m sure it helps to make your own family.” When his brow furrowed, I added, “Your brothers. Like Alessio.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I can understand why something like what happened to your family would make you want to get involved in security.”

He continued to nod, his arms wrapped around me tightening. “That safe room saved my life. It kept me hidden from the men who broke in. I wouldn’t be here without the security systems my parents implemented, and when SWAT rolled in, I… I don’t know, it stuck with me. The idea that there were people out there that could help others. That could protect people without a four-by-four room. I was just a kid, but I never wanted to be in a position where I ran from a fight again. I wanted to *help*.”

I nodded, unable to comprehend what he must’ve felt sitting in that room alone and helpless. No wonder he went into the line of work he did.

“What made you choose private security over SWAT?”

“The benefits.” Lachlan chuckled. “Do you see the penthouse you’re sitting in?”

“I do.”

“You think I’d get this on a government salary?”

“Be serious.”

“I *am* being serious.” He smirked. “I originally wanted to sign up for the police force after high school and work my way toward becoming a SWAT officer. But my aunt flipped out. She leaned heavily on my guilt, and the fact that my parents had put aside money so I could attend their university as a legacy student, so I ended up at Astor University for four years instead.”

“That doesn’t seem fair. If you knew what you wanted, she shouldn’t have guilted you into doing something else.”

Lachlan shrugged. “I was pissed at first, and felt the exact same way, but she thought she was doing the right thing. Plus, I wasn’t exactly the easiest teenager.”

“No? Do say more.”

“I liked getting into trouble. Usually with my fists. I was angry, sad, and privileged enough that if I got into a fight at Astor, nothing really ever came of it. I fell into a group of guys that came from the same kind of money as I did, and one night when things got a little out of hand at a bar, I got into a fight, passed out, and when I woke up…King was standing over me.”

“*King?* Your boss?”

Lachlan’s chest rumbled with laughter. “One and the same.”

“And what, he offered you a job?”

“He offered me an…opportunity. One that was difficult to refuse.”

I looked around the lavishly decorated suite, wondering what exactly that opportunity was. “You’re not going to tell me any more than that, are you?”

Lachlan leaned forward and brushed his lips over mine. “Nope.”

“What if I guess, and you just nod if I’m right?”

When Lachlan didn’t immediately nix that plan, I jumped right in.

“Okay, so during my recent tour of this building and my visit to someplace unknown where I met people I have already wiped from my brain, I have made several…observations.”

“Have you now?”

“I have.”

“And what might they be?”

“Well, first off, this private organization, at first I thought it was like a city thing, a New York Athletics Club or the Friars Club, but I think it’s bigger than that. I think it’s international, you know, since I met that prince that I’ve already forgotten about.”

Lachlan said nothing but nodded once.

“Aha.” I held my index finger up in victory. “I knew it. So that would mean your security company is global, right? You have locations all around the world protecting some of the most important people—like the forgotten prince and maybe a past president’s son? Who I’ve never met in my life.”

Again, Lachlan nodded, and my mouth fell open.

“Wow. So they’re obviously not part of the security company, and yet they were all in that super-secret meeting, eager to help you take down Mick’s drug operation. So are you working for the government?”

Lachlan laughed heartily at that. “No benefits, remember?”

“Okay, so, private contractors?”

Lachlan screwed his nose up, and suddenly it dawned on me.

“You don’t work for others—you work for *yourselves*.” I snapped my fingers and pointed at him. “You’re like a secret team of powerful guys who take down the bad guys.”

Lachlan seemed to ponder that for a moment, then said, “Let’s go with that.”

Was he crazy? He’d just given me *way* more than a silent nod, and now he expected me to be satisfied. Did he even know me at all?

“What do you mean by that? Are they not always bad guys? Are *you* the bad guy?”

Lachlan’s lips thinned and he shrugged. “Let’s just say I’m not *always* the good guy.”

My mouth opened, a million and one questions on the tip of my tongue. But instead of asking any of them, I reached for him, trailing my fingers down his stubble-lined jaw.

Lachlan had shared so much with me just now, way more than I’d ever expected. He’d given me a glimpse into his life, to what had helped shape him, and if he had to color outside the lines at times to keep people safe, who was I to judge?

Look at my vigilante, for God’s sake. I had no idea what he’d done to Mick’s guys that night. But if he hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have been alive to pick up the key card that had led me to Lachlan—and *that*, I now realized, would’ve been my biggest regret of all.

Lachlan was such a beautiful man, both inside and out. His face was one of the most breathtaking I’d ever seen. Even as he stared at me with serious eyes that seemed full of warning, all I could seem to do was run faster toward him.

I leaned forward and grazed my lips over his. “So you’re a good guy who occasionally does bad things, but…you’ve always been good to me.”

“I’ll always be good to you.”

“Then that’s all I can ask for.”

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LACHLAN

"ANY WORD YET?" Cooper asked from where he sat typing on his laptop in the business center the next day while I checked in virtually with my staff.

It was that in-between time, when all we could do was wait for Mick to reach out about the shipment and twiddle our fucking thumbs.

Although my thumbs—and the rest of my fingers—had found their way into some pleasurable crevices I didn't regret at all. In fact, the only reason I'd left the penthouse was because I couldn't seem to keep my hands off Cooper. It was becoming a problem.

Fuck. And now I was hard.

Choosing to ignore that, I answered, "You'll be the first to know."

"Ha. More like the last." Cooper stretched his neck from side to side. "Doesn't that news have to go through King, then you, and trickle down the pipeline first?"

"Okay. How about this: you'll know when I tell you."

He chuckled. "That's what I figured." With his fingers drumming against the keyboard, Cooper chewed his lip and seemed to be willing more words to come.

Or whatever it was writers did.

"Stuck?"

"No. More like there's nothing else to say until something happens. Although…"

"What?"

“Nothing.”

“*Cooper*.”

He sighed. “I mean, if you had just let me follow you to the warehouse, I’d have a visual I could describe.”

“So if I’d put you in danger, there’s a chance you would’ve made it back intact to be able to write what you’d seen. Got it.”

“Oh, come on.” Pushing his chair back, he stood and came over to the workstation I’d commandeered, and I failed at trying not to notice his slightly swollen lips, or the bruise forming on the side of his neck. It made my dick throb, seeing the evidence of where I’d marked him. As he came to rest his jean-clad ass against the edge of the desk, he nudged my knees apart with his leg. “You’d never let anything happen to me, Lachlan. You said so yourself.”

“It would be wise not to push your luck.”

“Oh yeah?” Cooper smiled with wicked intent, and I grabbed the back of his thighs, pulling him in closer. “I think you like it when I push the boundaries.”

“Push? You mean ignore. Bust through. Leap over.”

He laughed, resting his hands on my shoulders.

I liked that—his touching me so freely, cameras be damned.

“Hold on a sec, I *do* know my limits sometimes. Like now. I’m behaving, not running off to take a look at things myself.”

“Because you know I’d follow you.”

Cooper screwed up his nose like it wasn’t true but then rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine. You caught me.”

“Yes, I did.” I gave his legs a squeeze, bringing him forward, and nipped at his lower lip, taking it between my teeth. It wasn’t the right time or place, but it never was. I just didn’t give a damn anymore. Cooper was mine, and anyone watching who had a problem with it could say that shit to my face.

And they didn’t want to do that.

Something occurred to me then. “So you still need more information for your story, right?”

“It would be helpful, but impossible, since I’m stuck here.”

“What if there was a way to get you what you wanted without boots on the ground?”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed. “What are you cooking up in that head of yours?”

To that, I only smiled.

“THE ROOF? WHAT, are we busting out the binoculars?” Cooper joked. But then the elevator doors opened, and his jaw hit the floor. “No way.”

He didn’t move, and I took his hand and tugged him out onto the roof, where a helicopter waited on the helipad.

“Isn’t this against the rules?” he asked, but there was an underlying eagerness to his words that betrayed his caution.

“I’m offering you a way out and you’re worried about rules?” I lifted a brow, and Cooper broke into a grin.

“You’re right. Fuck the rules.” He climbed inside the cabin and buckled himself in, and after greeting the pilot and reiterating the flight plan, I joined him.

Minutes later we were off, hovering high above this city I loved, moving toward the river that would lead us to the docks where Mick’s warehouse was located.

Would King kick my ass if he knew I’d taken Cooper for a little joyride in the company helicopter? Yes. Did I care? Not even a little bit. Not when it had brought the biggest, brightest smile to Cooper’s face.

From the second he’d landed in New York up until now, he had only ever witnessed the dark side of this city. But as the pilot banked to the west and followed the Hudson, the afternoon sun sparkled off the water.

“This is incredible,” Cooper said into his headset, never taking his eyes off the spectacular view. “I’ve never done anything like this.”

That wasn’t hard to imagine, considering the size of his shoebox apartment. But being up here, my sharing this experience with him, was something I knew he’d remember beyond getting a glimpse of the location of Mick’s warehouse.

“Is that where we’re going?” he asked, pointing toward the docks coming into view.

“Yes. It’s quieter than any of the ports, a lot less security and traffic in and out—”

“So the perfect place to smuggle in drugs if you know the right people?”

I nodded. “Or pay off the right people.”

“Gotcha.”

“There it is, coming up on your left.” As the helicopter made the turn, Cooper peered down at the empty docks.

“It looks abandoned.”

“Exactly. Little to no foot traffic.”

“And that’s the warehouse behind it?”

“Yep.” And from what I could see, at least two guards. This wasn’t nearly as close as I would like to be for surveillance, but I was going to have to trust Alessio with that. I wasn’t about to risk Cooper’s following me and putting himself in danger again.

“Wow. It’s hard to believe that something so dangerous and illegal can be so close, and yet so out of reach.”

He shifted in his seat, and though he was wearing sunglasses, I could feel his eyes locking on to mine.

“I have a question.” My lips curled, and he chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But seriously, if you know where Mick’s warehouse is, why not just call the cops and tell them?”

Of course that was where his mind went. It could never just be an easy question with Cooper, like: *what’s your favorite part of the city?*

“If we called the cops now, all they’d find is an empty warehouse. Mick’s waiting on a shipment, remember? We haven’t gotten the call yet.”

“But why do I get the feeling you won’t tell them even when you *do* get the call? The other day when you guys were talking, it sounded like you were going to go in and handle it, sooo…are you working with, like, the CIA or something?”

That was a new one, and I could see why he might go there. The CIA were notorious for keeping their agents and assets as ghosts. They were excellent liars, but then again, so were us Kings.

When I didn’t respond, Cooper held up a hand. “Got it. You can’t say. Just that you’re the good guys.” When I looked at him over the top of my glasses, he added, “Most of the time.”

I smirked and gestured out the window. “You done here?”

Cooper wrote a couple more notes into his phone and snapped some more pictures of our surroundings, and when he nodded, I gave the pilot the go-ahead to continue on.

We headed farther up the Hudson, giving Cooper the best possible view of the Statue of Liberty, and with the sun setting behind the famous landmark, it was the perfect time of day to see it.

“That’s amazing,” he said, taking a few more photos. “I hadn’t even gotten a chance to go see it yet.”

“It wasn’t the first thing you did when you arrived?”

“I mean, I was kind of preoccupied. I haven’t done all the fun, touristy stuff yet, but it’s on the list.”

Of course he hadn’t. I’d been right in thinking Cooper was so focused that he hadn’t allowed himself a chance to see all the good parts of the city that had raised me. There was a reason I’d chosen to make my home here after graduating, though it’d been more of a grow-to-love than an insta-love thing for me.

“Oh wow, that’s the 9/11 memorial, huh. What do they call the big tower?”

“One World Trade Center.”

He nodded, going quiet for a long moment, and then we came up to Midtown and his face lit up at seeing the Empire State Building up close.

“The city doesn’t look so big from up here,” he said after I pointed out a few other sites I thought he’d want to take photos of. “I mean, obviously it’s huge, but you don’t really get a sense of how damn big every block is until you’re down there. Oh shit, is that Yankee Stadium?”

I nodded, his enthusiasm so appealing. It’d been a long time since I’d looked at anything with such joy. Hell, I couldn’t even *remember* the last time, but it felt as though I was living vicariously through Cooper’s eyes. Everything was exciting to him, a never-ending chorus of gasps and photos being taken.

He leaned in suddenly, holding his phone up, and pointed it at us so we both featured on the screen. “Smile,” he said, grinning broadly at the camera. I wasn’t an easy grinner, but his mood was rubbing off on me, and I could see the faint amusement on my face as he captured several photos in a row. Then kissed me quickly before looking back out. The helicopter was circling back in the direction of Central Park.

“This is by far the coolest thing I’ve done since I’ve been here,” Cooper said. “Thank you for this.”

His reaction only justified the decision I’d made on where we were going next. King wanted Cooper to stay at Libertine so he’d be safe, but more than that, he wanted me to keep an eye on him.

I reached over to tighten Cooper’s seatbelt before the helicopter began its descent to our destination.

And then I waited for the questioning to begin in three…two…

“Wait, this isn’t Libertine,” Cooper said, staring out at the building below.

“No, it’s not.”

“Where are we?”

We landed with a jolt, and as the pilot cut the engine, I unbuckled both our seatbelts. The door was pulled open, and I reached for Cooper’s hand and said, “Home.”

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COOPER

"HOME" TURNED OUT to be an entire floor of a luxury building somewhere directly below Central Park. While that alone was impressive, I was more shocked over the fact that he'd brought me there.

While Lachlan turned on the lights, I stood in the middle of an enormous room with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the sprawling park below. It was an incredible view, all covered in a frost of winter white, but I had a feeling come spring it would be to die for.

As Lachlan walked back in the room, I noticed his shoes were gone, and so was his jacket. He'd unbuttoned one of his sleeves and started rolling it up his arm, and it was such a picture of relaxation that I never saw of him at Libertine. This was obviously where he felt most comfortable, and the fact that I was here, in his private space, meant he trusted me enough and wanted me there.

My chest squeezed, and I took a mental picture, committing this moment to memory. When I first entered the Libertine penthouse, it hadn't felt at all like the kind of place Lachlan would live in, but this place even smelled like him, like a sexy, rich wood that immediately made me feel at ease.

Even in a place that boasted a freakin' helipad.

"Hungry?" he said, as he finished rolling up the second sleeve. There was something so effortlessly sexy about him here in his element, and even

though I knew he was referring to food, this whole scene had my cock taking notice.

I nodded. “Starving.”

Lachlan smirked, seeing right through me, as I figured he would. Hooking his fingers in the loop of my jeans, he jerked me forward, bringing my body against his muscled frame. Warm breath teased my lips open, but I only felt the graze of his mouth as he said, “You look good here.”

“Oh yeah?”

He nodded, grabbing hold of my ass, holding me right where he wanted me before stealing a kiss. “Come on.” He slapped my ass, and I yelped in surprise. “I’m making dinner.”

I followed him into a kitchen made for a Michelin-starred chef. “Wait, *you’re* making dinner? You don’t cook.”

Lachlan grabbed a pan from one of the lower cabinets and set it on the stove. “I don’t?”

He had to be faking me out.

“No, you prefer eating out and room service. I bet you don’t even know how to boil water.”

“Ha.” He grabbed a large knife from a block, flipped it in his hand, caught it by the handle, and shook his head as he muttered, “Don’t know how to boil water…”

The knife thing was impressive, but I wasn’t in the mood to eat burned meat. “Can I help?”

Lachlan pointed with the knife to the edge of the long island. “Sit and prepare to eat your words.”

It wasn’t a chair he was pointing at, so I hopped up onto the marble countertop and watched as he moved about the kitchen grabbing what he needed. That included a couple of defrosted Wagyu steaks from the fridge. Then he called out, “Think quick,” and tossed a bell pepper my way.

Onion and cilantro followed, and then he grabbed a wooden chopping board and slapped the two strips out to season. Salt was first, then the pepper, before he set it aside, washed his hands, and grabbed a second board. He gestured for the bell pepper.

“You’re really going to cook?”

“I really am.”

Wow. The man was just full of surprises tonight. I handed over the vegetable and watched as he washed and expertly cut it, slicing it vertically

and then peeling it open to remove the seeds in one go. He moved onto the onion next and had it peeled and cut in minutes, the knife moving so fast it was practically a blur. He really must know what he was doing, because if I had tried that I'd be missing a finger or two.

"So where'd you learn to cook?"

He reached for an oil dispenser and poured a liberal amount in the pan. "Self-taught. I like to eat, so I figured I better learn to cook."

"But you have a world-class restaurant at your disposal," I pointed out. "You could go there every night if you wanted to."

"I could." He turned a burner on and set the pan on it to heat. "But then I'd have to people and, well, I do better on my own."

"But I'm here."

He walked over to me and moved between my legs, kissing me on the lips. "Tonight, I'm making an exception."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "I like that. Being your exception."

"You need to let me go, or the oil will burn."

"Can't have that."

"Nope. I have something to prove now." He winked and moved out of my arms, then picked up the board with the steaks and moved to the stove.

God, there was something so innately sexy about watching him cook, and to know he was doing it to feed me made my stomach flip.

Smart, gorgeous, protective, *and* a cook? Someone pinch me. I had to be dreaming.

The sizzle of the steaks hitting the hot pan sounded, bringing me back to reality, and when I glanced over to where Lachlan was leaning back against the counter, he was absently tossing and catching the cutting knife he'd used on the vegetables.

Up… Down… Up… Down…

He'd toss it up, and as it flipped through the air he'd never once take his eyes off the expensive strips of steak as it came back down and landed in his palm. It was as if the knife were an extension of his arm.

"You're pretty good with that knife, huh?"

He didn't miss a beat. When the knife landed in his palm, he spun it around and then stabbed it into the cutting board.

My eyes widened. "Should I, uh, be worried?"

A wolfish smile curved his delicious lips. "Probably, but when has that ever stopped you?"

He was right of course. What did he say? If I saw danger or trouble I ran right toward it, so why should this be any different?

"Never. So if you're trying to scare me…it's not working."

He chuckled and moved back to the stove, flipping the steaks to sear the other side. Once they were done, he slid them into the oven to finish them.

"Okay, flirt." He gestured to the veggies. "Make yourself useful and bring them over here, would you?"

I headed his way as he pulled a second pan out and placed it on the stove, added bit of oil, and then tossed the vegetables in.

"Chef Stone," I said, resting my chin on his shoulder from behind, "have I mentioned how sexy this is?"

"Got a thing for men in the kitchen?"

"Not necessarily *men*."

"Oh? Someone who can wield a big…knife?"

I laughed. "That was fucking terrible, but yeah. I would watch you wield just about anything."

"You're trying to get me to burn this, aren't you?"

"Absolutely not. Burned meat would be tragic." Being a tease, I ran my semi against the crease of his ass until he groaned.

He turned and hauled me up by the back of my thighs before planting me on the counter again. After a quick kiss, he said, "Dinner, then dessert, troublemaker."

I pulled out a knife from the block. "Hey, you think you can teach me that knife trick?"

Lachlan wrestled it from my grasp. "Hell no." For good measure, he took the entire block and set it on the other side of the island.

"Aw, who's scared now?" I teased.

"I'd rather not end up in an ER tonight."

"What, you don't have a surgeon on call to stitch me back up?"

Lachlan shook his head as he tossed the vegetables in the pan. "I enjoy your fingers too much to let you cut them off."

Mmm, and now that only had me thinking about where I wanted to put them.

Once the meat came out of the oven and he put it aside to rest, I watched him put his knife expertise to use again by cutting up the cilantro.

"Don't get me wrong, this is all fantastic, but I'm feeling a little useless just sitting here while you do all the work."

Lachlan glanced up, ran his eyes over me, and said, “Don’t worry—you’ll be doing all the work later.” My mouth fell open, and he added, “But you can start by taking your sweater off.”

That was not helping the situation happening below the waist, but who was I to deny the sexy man making me dinner?

I got rid of the sweater, laying it across the bar chair behind me, but he didn’t say anything about the shirt I had on underneath.

As he tested the meat with his finger, he looked up and saw I wasn’t half-naked. “Really? That’s all I get?”

“Is there something else you wanted?”

He tossed the knife in the air without looking, caught it, and pointed the tip in my direction. “Yes. I want that shirt on the fucking floor.”

Now that was an order I was quick to follow—and seriously hard from.

Lachlan waited until I pulled the shirt over my head and threw it in the corner before he began to slice the steak. The delicious smells mixing in the air made my stomach rumble, but I wasn’t sure which hunger would win out if given the choice.

“Do I get a taste?”

“You think you deserve one?”

“I do.” I held up my hands. “All my fingers are still accounted for. That should get me something.”

Lachlan cut a piece off the meat and held it between his fingers as he walked back over to me, juice running down his hand. “This what you want?”

My dick jerked as I leaned forward and bit down. The meat’s flavor burst onto my tongue, rich and savory. Lachlan watched my mouth like a man in a trance as I chewed and swallowed, and when he went to walk away I grabbed hold of his wrist.

“Where are you going? I wasn’t finished.” I leaned forward to lick a path down his hand and wrist, lapping up the juice like the greedy man I was.

Lachlan growled. “Fuck, Cooper.”

I raised my eyes to his, and the dark arousal swirling there made my pulse kick.

“Uh uh,” I said. “Dinner first, *then* dessert.”

Lachlan’s jaw bunched as I let go of his arm, and minutes later he had everything set atop the island to prepare our meal.

“Well…” He looked over to me sitting shirtless on the counter and crooked a finger. “Come and get it.”

Was he kidding? I’d be lucky if I could walk from one end of the kitchen to the other with as hard as I was.

“I’ll come over there when you even the playing field.” I eyed his shirt and gestured. “Get rid of the shirt, Chef Stone.”

Lachlan pulled his shirt tails from his pants and I slipped off the counter, and with every step I took toward him he freed a button until I was standing directly in front of him. But when I reached out to touch him, he sidestepped me and pointed to the food. I turned to look at the impressive spread that now included tortillas and cheese.

“Trust me,” he said, “you’re going to need the sustenance for what’s coming next.”

A shiver raced through me as he tossed his shirt over the other side of the counter.

“Make up a plate, Cooper.” He pressed a kiss to the side of my neck. “The sooner you eat, the sooner I get to eat *you*.”

I piled up two tacos and moved to the other side of the island and sat. When he took the seat beside me, we dug in. Silence descended as if by some pre-arranged agreement. Or maybe it was just that we both knew what was coming after the meal.

Not to take away from how damn good the food was, but with a half-naked Lachlan sitting next to me, radiating some serious fucking heat, it was all I could do to chew and swallow my tacos and not choke on them.

When I took the final bite of my meal and turned, we each pushed our plates aside and looked one another over.

Then, as if he could read my mind, Lachlan grinned sinfully and reached for me.

“You better have left room for dessert.”

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LACHLAN

I COULD BARELY get through the damn meal with Cooper making eyes at me like that.

I should've bent him over my knee the second he flirted with me, but I thought we could restrain ourselves enough to have a meal.

Not wanting to waste another second, I slammed my mouth down on his. He wrapped his legs around my waist to hold on, our mouths still fused together as I walked us to my bedroom.

Having him here, in a place I never took anyone, felt right. I was intensely private for a reason, but with Cooper I found myself wanting to share things I'd never even considered sharing before. I'd thrown all my fucks out the window and invited him in, and so far, it appeared to have been a really good idea.

Especially when I threw him on the bed.

Cooper grinned up at me, his eyes roaming down my bare chest to the erection testing the zipper of my pants. He rubbed the heel of his palm over his hard-on.

"As much as I like this picture"—I unbuttoned my pants and reached for the zipper—"I'd like it a hell of a lot more if your pants were on the floor."

Cooper didn't hesitate, undoing his pants and shoving them off his body at the same time I did mine. By the time I climbed onto the bed, he was leaning back into the pillows and spreading his legs in invitation.

“Now, *that*”—I reached into my side table drawer and pulled out a bottle of lube—“is much better.”

I climbed back on the bed, and Cooper wrapped his legs around me and flipped us so that he was on top. He smirked at me and pinned my arms up by my head.

“I can see why you like this,” he said, as he sat back up.

I had to admit, having him straddle me, giving him a bit of the power I usually enjoyed, was hot. Patience wasn’t usually in my toolbox, but I waited, wanting to see what he would do.

Cooper traced my lips with his finger, and I nipped at it and then sucked it into my mouth. He moaned, squirming over me, taunting my poor dick with his ass.

He removed his finger and drew it down my neck, my chest, over my abs, and then lower, fingering the close-cropped curls that surrounded my growing erection.

“Cooper,” I growled, but seconds later he wrapped his hand around my cock.

Fuck, he made a hot picture—naked over me, fisting my dick. Scooting back so he could lean down and lick pre-cum from my slit.

Now I understood why I had to pin his arms down when the situation was reversed, because positioned like this, I *had* to touch him.

“Oh no you don’t,” he said, ripping that sweet mouth away. Leaning over me, he rocked his cock against mine.

“You’re a tease.”

“And you love it.” He reached down between us, grasping my dick again. With every stroke, his tongue tangled with mine, and it felt so goddamn good that I fell into his rhythm, letting him set the pace, where he wanted this night to go.

“I want you like this,” he whispered against my lips. “I want to see you.”

“Then climb on my dick, Cooper.”

He slid down me then pushed up to his knees. “So you’re a bossy bottom—good to know.”

“Did you really expect anything else? Plus”—I reached down between us to angle my cock in his direction—“I might be *on* the bottom, but it’s still *your* sweet ass that’s going to be riding this.”

Cooper swiped his thumb over the sticky head of my shaft, then sucked it into his mouth. I counted back from one hundred in an effort not to come as he reached for the lube.

He flipped open the lid and poured some of the cool liquid in his palm, his grin growing downright devilish. Then he tossed the bottle aside and wrapped his hand around me, squeezing from base to tip.

"Fuck." My head fell back against the pillow.

"Eyes on me."

He was getting a kick out of this. Something I would have to remember the next time I got him under me.

My eyes came back to his heavy-lidded gaze, and this time when he repeated the move, I thrust my hips up and shoved my dick through that tight fist. Cooper moaned, thighs clenching on either side of my body, and I knew that sweet little hole of his would be doing the same.

"Seems a waste for me to be fucking your fist when we both know you'd rather I—"

My words cut off as Cooper moved up on his knees and reached back to play with the exact place I was referring to. "Trust me when I tell you I'm not about to waste *that*." He aimed his attention at the ropey string of pre-cum between the head of my cock and stomach. Then he shifted up my body until he was in position to take me. "I was just making sure I was ready to fuck you."

Jesus H. Christ.

How did he expect me to just lie here when he was throwing out comments like that? But I'd made a promise to let him lead the way tonight, so I was going to do my best to keep it.

Even though it might kill me.

Cooper reached behind himself and angled my shaft toward his tight, hot body. His erection bobbed in front of him, all veiny and flushed, and as he lowered himself, his stare locked with mine.

Desire laced those blue eyes, and as the head of my cock breached that first tight ring of muscle, a gasp of pleasure slipped out of his mouth.

His head fell back and my hands moved to his thighs, and as he slowly began to sink down on me, I slid my palms up his smooth skin.

"Lachlan," he moaned as he took inch after inch inside his velvet hot ass. When I was finally balls deep, he stilled on top of me.

“Eyes on me,” I said, returning his earlier sentiment, and when Cooper raised his head and looked down at me, the emotions swirling in his eyes had my heart racing.

Lust, longing, trust, and affection were all there, wrapped up in one look, and at the very center of it was something much stronger—possessiveness. He was looking at me like I was his, and he was right. I wasn’t going any-fucking-where, and neither was he.

Slowly, he began to move, rocking his hips, stretching himself to fit me, and it was the sweetest, most agonizing torture, but one I craved. Being inside him was home.

Cooper rose off me, and I instantly missed the feel of him. But then he bore down again, and my cock filled that incredible ass.

He was right—watching as we fucked, seeing every bit of pleasure we wrung from each other, made coming together so much more intense. With every drive back down on me, it only solidified that this thing between us was real, no matter the circumstances that had brought us together in the first place.

That confession needed to come up sooner rather than later, though I’d be shocked if Cooper didn’t already have some idea brewing, even subconsciously. He was too smart not to piece it together eventually.

Cooper slamming back down on me had me gasping, all other thought than what was happening right here, right now, flying the hell out of my head.

“Oh God.” His hand flexed against my chest, and it was all I could do not to reach up and lick the sweat glistening off his neck.

Actually—*fuck it*.

Reaching for his hips to keep him where he was, I sat up, bringing us face to face. With him straddling me and our bodies pressed together, my dick sank inside him even deeper. He cursed, and I swallowed it, kissing him hard.

His tongue licked alongside mine as he impaled himself on me, again and again, and I ran my hands up his back, holding him tight to me. My fingers twined in his hair, and I pulled his head back just enough to kiss down his jaw and suck the soft skin beneath his ear.

“Don’t think I’m ever letting you go now,” I said, making my way back to his lips.

Breathless, Cooper tightened his arms around me, and I felt him squeeze tight around my cock. “You better not.”

I could feel we were on the same page, but hearing him say it had a possessive growl ripping out of me. Stealing his mouth again, I thrust up into him every time he lowered back onto me, and it wasn’t long before the steady pace he’d set became uneven.

Cooper’s breathing was choppy, the sounds making my balls tighten every time his warm breath ghosted over my skin. I gripped the back of his neck as his hips began to work overtime, his dick making a mess of my stomach as he painted it like a canvas.

But none of that held a candle to the blissed-out expression on his gorgeous face.

His cheeks were flushed pink, his lashes dark against them as he squeezed his eyes shut, and as he rocked his hips in a distinct rhythm, I knew he’d found the spot. That magical fucking spot that was going to get him there. The one that had his thighs tightening around my waist, as he got ready to ride the wave of complete and total ecstasy.

My cock throbbed inside him, my balls protesting against my restraint, but when Cooper tensed and then shuddered, the climax raced down my spine.

The hot spray of cum on my skin set off my own explosion, as Cooper’s ass clenched around me and milked me dry. He was panting by my ear, prayers to God and odes to myself, but as we both drifted down from the ultimate high, it was me who should be thanking God.

Not only for putting me in that alley to save Cooper that night, but for his being there to save me right back.

Cooper was everything I never knew I wanted. And now that I had him, I’d be damned if I ever let him go.

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COOPER

I WAS IN heaven.

There was no other word for it, because being wrapped up in Lachlan's arms, in his bed, in his *home*, was the best feeling I'd had in my life.

It felt so right that I never wanted to leave. And if his promises were true, he wasn't going to ever let me.

I snuggled in closer, my back pressed up against his chest, his arm heavy over my waist. No one in the world was safer than I was in that moment. Or more wanted. Because the truth was, Lachlan Stone wanted me. He'd fallen for me the same way I had for him, and this thing between was really happening.

No, not *thing*. Relationship.

Shit, did I call him my boyfriend now? Were we too old for labels like that? He wasn't *that* much older than me at thirty-seven, but he seemed so much wiser, or maybe that was because he was aware of things in the world I couldn't even comprehend…yet.

Lachlan stirred and pressed a kiss to the back of my neck. His voice was still thick with sleep as he said, "How are you awake? I thought you'd be passed out for days."

I should've been. How did I admit that while my body was exhausted, my mind was too excited about possibilities to sleep? Especially when no dream could outpace my reality.

“Oh, I won’t be moving anytime soon,” I said, angling my head so that he could continue planting sleepy kisses down the side of my neck. “Just feeling really”—I searched for the right word—“*happy*.”

His arm tightened around me, and I thought I felt his lips curve against my skin.

“Because you’re mine.” He didn’t say it like a question, but like a fact I couldn’t deny.

I rolled over, every muscle in my body screaming, but I wanted to see his face when I told him, “Because you’re mine right back.”

Lachlan’s response was a slow, sexy smile that melted my insides and confirmed we were on the same page.

Mine. His.

Fucking *swoon*.

He kissed me then, unhurried, his tongue tracing my lips before diving in to explore my mouth. Strong hands rubbed along my back, holding me close. If I died right then, I would’ve died the most content person who’d ever lived.

Somewhere in the house, a phone began to ring, loud and insistent. Lachlan’s entire body tensed before he tore off the covers and jumped out of bed. The way he didn’t hesitate had me sitting up, watching warily as he answered the call.

I couldn’t even find it in me to enjoy the eyeful of his gloriously naked body, not with the tense expression on his face as he listened.

“Got it.” That was all he said before hanging up and heading back to the bedroom.

“What was—”

“It’s going down. Get dressed. They’ll be here soon.” He tossed me my heap of clothes from the floor and then disappeared into his closet as my heart began to hammer.

Shit. It was happening. Our little bubble had just burst, and now we had to prepare for an entirely different, probably dangerous, situation.

I forgot all about the ache in my well-used body as I threw my clothes back on and ran a hand through my hair a few times. Lachlan emerged a couple minutes later, dressed entirely in black, and it stopped me in my tracks.

He looked lethal, and so fucking hot I could only stare.

Black leather pants. Tactical Henley. Boots. And a fierce look in his eye that made my heart skip a few beats.

That outfit—it was so familiar, yet I'd only ever seen Lachlan in a suit…

"You ready?" he said.

"What's happening? Are we meeting everyone somewhere?"

"They'll be downstairs in"—Lachlan looked at his watch—"less than a minute."

"Oh shit," I said, but he was already reaching for my hand and heading to the elevator I'd somehow missed earlier.

Seconds later we were stepping out the door as a Lexus SUV pulled up to the curb, black and sleek with tinted windows. The only visible sign that someone was manning the vehicle was the shadow of a figure behind the driver's wheel.

The passenger window rolled down enough that I could see King's eyes staring out at me, then they shifted to Lachlan.

"Get in."

The back door was shoved open, and Lachlan got in first, then held his hand out to me. Not about to be left standing on the side of the road, I took his hand and climbed up into the vehicle, pulling the door shut behind me. That was when I noticed every other seat was occupied by each of the men I'd met during that super-secret meeting.

And immediately forgotten about, of course.

Where was I going to—

"Right here," Lachlan said as though he'd read my mind. He pulled me down onto his lap, and a snicker from in the back somewhere echoed around the SUV.

"Escape for a little midnight delight, did we?" Lucien's voice was immediately recognizable.

"None of your business."

"Clearly." Lucien chuckled. "Since you didn't bring him to *my* establishment."

"Level five wasn't exactly the vibe we were going for tonight."

Wait, *Lucien* ran level five? Oh God, I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to actually experience that with Lachlan.

Or maybe I could, judging by the way my dick now ached between my legs.

“Could you please hold the gossip until the drive home?” Benoit’s lyrical voice came from the driver’s seat. “It’s too juicy, and I’m too focused right now to give it all my attention.”

“That sounds like a plan.” King’s gruff voice put an end to any and all small talk. “Alessio, want to fill lover boy in?”

I grimaced at Lachlan, wondering if he was going to be read the riot act for us leaving Libertine—and *us* in general. But when he leaned forward and nipped at my ear, a wolf whistle sounded throughout the van, and it was pretty clear he didn’t care either way.

Alessio sat forward from the middle back seat. “Mick made contact with the burner about thirty minutes ago. Sent over the address. Shipment should be loaded and in the warehouse by the time we arrive.”

“Your drones pick anything up?” Lachlan asked.

“A couple security guys on the front and back doors and a private fishing boat. Seems like an odd hour to go throw a line, if you ask me.”

A snort came from beside us, and I finally allowed myself to look at the Prince of fucking Monaco.

“More like throw a body,” he said. My mouth fell open, and he smirked. “Not that I would know.”

“Cut it out, Theo,” King said as Benoit made a turn into a less affluent part of town. “The plan remains as discussed. We breach, detain, and walk away. When that’s complete, Shep will make the final call.”

“Hang on a fucking second,” Lachlan said. “Detain? When was that decided—”

“During your absence,” King answered.

“But their drugs have been killing people.”

My spine stiffened at the mention of why I was there to begin with. Alex’s death; Mick’s part in that. Once again Lachlan seemed to be able to read my mind, as he tightened his arms around me in a silent show of support.

“I understand that,” King said. “And they will pay—”

“By being put in a prison cell where they’ll get three meals a day and healthcare?”

“Lachlan.” The name was harsh on King’s tongue, and Lachlan’s mouth clamped shut. “You have your orders, and you will follow them. Do I make myself clear?”

I could feel the tension in every part of his body, rebelling against King's orders, but ultimately he gave a curt nod.

But he was still wound tight, and I realized what he was so upset about. He didn't want to just throw those fuckers in jail. He wanted to dole out bodily harm.

Or more.

I didn't know what it said about me that I could understand why he'd be upset. One look at Mick and I'd want my revenge, and that didn't include an orange jumpsuit.

A few minutes of tense silence later and Benoit turned off the headlights—and immediately a screen lowered down to show the area around us in night vision.

"Holy shit," I said, eliciting a few chuckles from behind us. But I'd never seen anything like that before. I already knew this couldn't just be some normal SUV, not with the caliber of men in this vehicle, but I hadn't even known these things existed.

"Here's what's going to happen," King said, glancing over his shoulder to catch my attention before facing front again. "You're with us now, but under no circumstances do you leave this car."

My initial instinct was to protest, but then he continued.

"You will, however, be able to watch and hear what's happening on the screen. I understand this is something important to you, and your story, so I'll allow it as long as you remember the terms of your agreement."

Fuck yes, I could do that. That was so much more than I'd expected to be privy to. I nodded.

"Thank you," I said, my adrenaline pumping.

But then the fear flooded in, because what if something happened to Lachlan? To any of them? I mean, they all seemed confident—overly so—but who knew what to expect from Mick and his crew?

"Don't worry," Lachlan said by my ear as Benoit parked beneath the bridge. I couldn't see the warehouses from here, everything pitch black around us, but then the night vision on the screen went dark, and Lachlan nodded to it. "You'll be able to watch there."

The doors opened, everyone filing out and heading to the back, where Alessio handed out earpieces, the tiniest mics I'd ever seen, and what looked like buttons but turned out to be cameras—one by one the screen filled with each man's view.

“Benoit will be here with you,” Lachlan said, and then took the notebook and pen that Benoit handed over his shoulder and gave it to me. “Get your story.”

My mouth parted. The gift was an unexpected one.

He gripped my chin and pressed a kiss to my lips before lifting me off his lap.

“Stay safe,” I said, and Lachlan turned around to point at me.

“*You* stay safe. And don’t leave this car, no matter what happens.”

I nodded, and then he headed to the back to get his own tech set from Alessio.

Benoit turned in the driver’s seat and waved his hand. “You don’t need to worry about Lachlan, *mon cher*. It’s the men inside who should be worried about Lachlan.”

“What do you mean?”

Benoit chuckled and tapped the screen. “You’ll see.”

And he was right—I *would* see. I’d see everything, and I’d be able to watch Lachlan in action.

Now *that* had anticipation running through me.

It was so dark outside that all I could see were vague figures, but then Lachlan was back at the door, sliding into a long black trench coat with a hood.

Recognition sparked as Alessio came from behind and handed him something…something metal…something black that sparked silver in the car’s interior light.

Oh my God.

A smirk curled Lachlan’s lips, his eyes twinkling at me, and he shot me a wink before slipping on the mask.

“See you soon…Scout,” he said, his voice the deep, muffled one I remembered from the alley…my bedroom…all my fucking fantasies.

As he slammed the door shut, I could only stare after him in shock, because Lachlan Stone had just morphed into my masked vigilante lover.

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COOPER

I DIDN'T KNOW how long I stared gaping at the door before Benoit's laugh filled the now-empty space.

He turned around, and even though it was dark, I could see the amusement playing across his face from the dim light on the screen.

"Now you get it, don't you?"

No shit I got it. I'd seen the masked man—*Lachlan*—in action, and Benoit was right: everyone in that building should be fucking terrified of him, not the other way around. I'd seen him take out an alley full of men on his own with hardly any effort, and now he had the rest of his brothers as backup.

"Oh…my…God." It was all I could manage. All I could think. Because Lachlan was the masked vigilante, and somehow, in my gut, it all made sense. The déjà vu, the familiar feelings that came out of nowhere that I couldn't place. He was right there in front of me and somehow I hadn't seen it. Or was it that I'd refused to see it?

"Piecing things together?" Benoit said. "I heard all about Lachlan's little escapade in the alley with you. Well, I saw it too—"

"You *saw* it?"

"*Oui*. And I should say, you're very lucky to be so attractive."

I blinked, wondering if I'd heard him right. "You're saying Lachlan saved me that night because I'm attractive?"

"*Non.* But it helps." He winked, and I realized he was teasing me.

"So…wait, how did you see what happened? Were you there?"

“Eh. Violence isn’t really my scene, but I did enjoy the recap.” He tapped the screen.

Cameras. Lachlan must’ve been wearing one that night.

I ran a hand over my face and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to reconcile everything that had happened with both men—well, one man and his alter ego. Maybe I should’ve felt embarrassed somehow, even upset at the revelation. Lachlan hadn’t been forthcoming about being the one who’d saved me, the one who’d snuck into my apartment. The one I’d practically begged to fuck me.

Okay, maybe I was a little embarrassed over that fact, but mostly I was surprised that I *wasn’t* surprised at all. Lachlan in either form had always looked out for me and made me feel safe, and even now he was out there taking down the bad guys. Now I understood what he meant when he’d said he wasn’t always the good guy, because I’d seen him do things with my own eyes that crossed the so-called ethical line.

Maybe the craziest part about it all was that I didn’t blame him one bit.

“Ah, here we go, *mon ami*,” Benoit said, settling back in the driver’s seat like he was about to watch his favorite TV program. The different squares on the screen had gotten progressively lighter as Lachlan, King, and the others made their way to the warehouse.

Even though I knew Lachlan was capable of taking care of himself, my stomach still did a nervous flip. “You, uh, don’t seem stressed about this,” I said.

“I’m not.”

Even with that reassurance, my heart began to race as they split up into two teams to approach from different points.

It’s going to be fine. They’re all going to be fine.

The only thing I could hear in the SUV was the sound of my heart thumping as both teams moved with stealth through the cool night.

Lachlan had split off with Alessio, which was no surprise considering how tight they were, and the final person making up their trio was none other than King himself.

“Lachlan always heads up a mission like this,” Benoit explained. “Always goes in first. Always protects the King.”

“Because he’s the best?”

Benoit smiled. “Partly. But mainly to make sure the coast is clear before—”

“The most important person walks in the room.”

“Exactly. Lachlan is more dangerous than any weapon our guys carry, so he usually…*assesses* the scene first.”

In other words, he went in, kicked the ass of anyone who posed a threat, then sent the signal that the rest could enter without dying. Awesome. This wasn’t going to be stressful at all.

Benoit pointed to Lachlan’s screen. “They’re approaching the front entrance now.”

“Everyone in place?” Lachlan’s voice came over the mic clearly.

“Affirmative,” Shep responded as they moved into position at the back entrance of the warehouse. “Two security guards as expected, you?”

“Same.” Lachlan shifted, the two men he was talking about appearing on the screen. “Nonlethal in three,” he grumbled, his annoyance at that order clear as he started the countdown. “Three… Two… One.”

A soft *pop pop* sounded through the mic, and the security guards on both Lachlan and Shep’s feed dropped to the ground.

“Clear,” Shep confirmed.

“Clear. Continue to the door,” Lachlan said. “Wait for my next order.”

I sat riveted to the screen, just as Benoit had said he would be, as the teams moved through the shadows as though they were part of them. When they got to the entrance and Lachlan looked down at the men, I noticed they were still breathing.

“So, nonlethal means what, exactly?”

“Basically being struck by lightning.”

“Oh…”

I glanced up just in time to see Alessio had moved to the front of Team Lachlan, getting all kinds of excited when he pulled out my key card.

See? I was helping in some way.

Alessio swiped the card through the reader by the door, and when the light flashed green he whispered, “Bingo.”

He shifted back behind King, him and Lachlan flanking their leader like the loyal guards they were, as Lachlan reached for the door. He gently pushed down on the handle, making sure to keep quiet, and as he slipped in through the door and it shut behind him, I sucked in a breath.

He was alone now. That shouldn’t have worried me—I’d seen him fight off armed men with nothing more than his bare hands. But as he crept

behind a row of shelves and his camera picked up a group of men standing around a table covered with boxes, I felt a lump in the back of my throat.

There had to be at least a dozen of them—some opening and unpacking the boxes, laying out bags of pills that others were counting and dividing into smaller packets, and I wasn't naïve enough to think they were doing all that without some kind of weapons on hand.

Shit. Why had he gone in alone again?

Benoit held a mic up to his mouth and said, "Looks like close to fifteen in house, all centered in the room. Lachlan has eyes on the product, but not the target."

"Yet," Lachlan added.

He moved farther down the row, the camera picking up dusty boxes with old boat parts and fishing tackle as he moved, trying to get a better view.

I held my breath as a familiar head of black hair came into view, standing off to the side with his gaze on his phone. Mick typed away, letting his crew handle the work, and I could almost hear the dark glee in Lachlan's voice as he said, "Motherfucking target in view. He's mine."

From outside the warehouse, King said, "Remember—nonlethal."

A grunt could barely be heard, but it clearly came from Lachlan.

"Ready to initiate countdown?" Benoit asked, and Lachlan gave a thumbs-up, followed by his middle finger. Benoit rolled his eyes. "Classy. Team one?"

"We're a go," King said.

"Team two?"

"Ready for your count." It was Shep who answered, a fact that was still blowing my mind. If the rest of America knew their golden boy was moonlighting by performing drug busts, they'd never believe it. Hell, I was watching it and still couldn't.

Benoit began the count, and when he hit one and both teams burst into the warehouse, I uncapped my pen but didn't take my eyes off the screen.

Shouts sounded and it was instant chaos, Lachlan and each of the brothers moving so fast it was hard to keep up. Whatever it was they were using to knock the thugs out worked like a charm, bodies falling left and right, scattering the piles of pills.

I scribbled as fast as I could, marking down the important details of what was happening and hoping like hell I'd be able to read the mess later.

“Shit—” I started as a figure approached on one of the cameras, but Benoit was already on it.

“Theo, on your left.”

Lightning fast, Theo immobilized the man, and I couldn’t help but think it was a smart idea for the masks and hoods. If they weren’t taking care of these guys in a permanent way, the last thing they needed was for their identities to get out.

Lachlan had Mick in his sights, but he didn’t bother incapacitating him. Instead, he sauntered toward him, taking his time as Mick panicked, searching for an escape but realizing he was cornered, his crew’s bodies dropping around him.

I couldn’t look away as Mick reached for something behind his back, but Lachlan didn’t give him time to grab whatever it was. With a flick of his wrist, he released a throwing star, nailing Mick in the arm. A cry ripped out of him, but Lachlan kept coming. From the view of one of his brothers, I could see Lachlan reach for a knife, and he began to flip it as he approached Mick, the same way he had in his kitchen.

“Nonlethal takedown,” Benoit reminded him, but he didn’t seem too put out by Lachlan seemingly disobeying orders. In fact, I wagered he wished he had a bucket of popcorn.

“He’s not going to die,” Lachlan said, stopping in front of Mick, who held both his hands up in surrender. “He’s just going to wish he did.”

“No,” Mick said, looking past Lachlan for any sign of someone to help, but from the view of the other feeds, the coast was looking clear. Mick straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin, a final act of defiance as he dropped his hands. “Who are you?”

“Your worst fucking nightmare,” Benoit said.

Mick wiped at his nose, his jerky movements proving he hadn’t given up using at least some of his *non*fatal product. “Is it the drugs you want or the money?”

Lachlan shook his head slowly and flipped his knife again. “Justice.”

Before Mick could open his mouth again, Lachlan slashed his thigh, causing Mick to shout in pain and double over, grabbing at his injury.

But Lachlan wasn’t done.

His gloved fist made contact with Mick’s face with a loud crack, cutting off the scumbag’s shouts as he dropped to the floor like a rag doll.

“Oh shit,” I said, on the edge of my seat as Lachlan looked directly at the closest camera to him, Alessio’s feed, and said, “For Alex.”

Then he slammed his knife into Mick’s hand, effectively nailing him to the floor.

Mick screamed in agony as the sharp blade penetrated his skin and bone, and Benoit looked back at where I sat slack-jawed staring at the screen.

Holy. Fuck.

At least it wasn’t through the guy’s heart—which was what he really deserved, if you asked me.

“You okay?” Benoit said, waving a hand in front of me.

“Uh, yeah, I—”

“We’ve got to go,” King interrupted over the mic, and as if we were both out there with them, we instantly fell silent. “Stone,” King barked at Lachlan. “Fall back, *now*.”

Lachlan slowly rose to his feet, his camera looming over Mick where he lay pinned to the broken floorboards, then turned on his heel and started back toward the warehouse entrance.

Through his camera I could see two of his brothers up ahead. Tall and commanding, they walked like leaders, and as they started to talk, I realized why.

“Once we’re out,” King said, “you make the call.”

“On it,” Shep replied.

A deep chuckle came from Alessio as they exited the warehouse one at a time and moved through the darkness toward the vehicle. “Aw, cheer up, lover boy—at least you got to play with your knives.”

“It’s not the same,” Lachlan grumbled, then under his breath added, “Couldn’t even let me have one guy.”

“I heard that,” King said. “And you know why.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

As much as I was dying to know what the “why” was, all I could feel was relief that Lachlan and the others were walking back here alive and breathing.

And as total fucking badasses.

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LACHLAN

COOPER STUMBLED OUT of my bedroom close to noon the next day, eyes barely open and wearing my track pants low on his hips. He'd been up all night finishing his story so he could send it to the media of his choice—courtesy of Shep's connections—and then he had a million and one questions for me.

Couldn't blame him. I'd left him in the SUV after a surprise reveal, and I could still see his shocked look in my mind.

That'd been risky. It could've gone badly, could've ended with my coming back to an empty car.

Thank fuck he'd still been there. If he hadn't, I wasn't sure that I could've stopped myself from going after him anyway.

"Why…do I feel…like I have…a hangover." Cooper groaned and sank into the couch beside me, resting his head on my lap.

"You had a big night."

He yawned. "Long night."

I couldn't resist touching him and ran my hand along his bare back and into his mess of hair.

"Mmm, that feels good."

Was this what contentment felt like? It was strange, how unfamiliar but right it felt. Like we did this every day, Cooper breaking a story, me rising with the dawn to get a start on the day. Then coming together in these quiet moments where all I wanted to do was be close to him. Touch him. Kiss him.

I leaned down, planting a kiss on his temple, and that inner voice inside practically roared, *Mine*. Cooper Patterson was mine, and not even the revelation that I was the psycho from the night in the alley had done anything to dissuade him from that fact.

My phone vibrated on the arm of the couch. Alessio.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Rumor has it you should turn on the news."

"Which station?"

"Any of them." He hung up, and Cooper rolled onto his back, looking up at me.

"You don't have to leave, do you?"

"*We* aren't going anywhere," I said, flipping on the TV and scrolling through the channels until the first news station came up.

"Breaking news at the top of the hour, authorities have taken down a massive drug-smuggling ring in the shipping district—"

Cooper shot up off my lap, eyes going wide.

"It appears an anonymous source tipped off the FBI to a warehouse late last night, where hundreds of pounds of the drug Rapture were found being prepared for distribution. More than two dozen fatalities across the U.S. can be traced back to the drug, with many more hospitalized from its effects. Authorities confirm fifteen men were arrested in connection with the sting, including rumored drug boss Mick Shaughnessy, who reportedly sustained nonfatal injuries."

"Thanks, King," I muttered, wishing I'd been able to do more than injure the fucking guy. Even if I understood the why of it all.

"The story was first reported by Cooper Patterson via New York News Now—"

"Oh my fucking God," Cooper shrieked, jumping to his feet, suddenly *very* awake. He fisted his hands on top of his head as he watched the rest of the story play out, his mouth wide open.

I watched him, his excitement palpable, as he whirled around to face me. "Holy shit, Lachlan. Did you see that?"

"I did."

"They said my name on the fucking news. New York News Now is printing my story. What the…"

It was impossible not to match the massive grin on his face as he turned back to the TV, where a video of the warehouse showed the FBI on scene,

leading Mick away in handcuffs. I had to admit, my smile grew even wider when I spotted his bandaged hand and thigh.

"I can't believe they picked up my story."

"Why not? You're a talented journalist who—"

"Hang on a second." Cooper glanced back at me, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "How would you know I'm a *talented* journalist?"

Busted. But what could I say? *When Alessio brought me your information the night I saved you, I became your number one stalker fan?*

It was true, and now Cooper knew it. But saying it out loud made me feel slightly unhinged.

"You looked me up, didn't you?"

That was one way to put it. The more accurate way of putting it would be: I'd become a man obsessed.

"I was…intrigued by you."

"Oh yeah?" Cooper turned his full attention on me then, a slow sensual smile curving his kiss-swollen lips.

"Yeah." I sat forward on the couch and reached for his hand, tugging him between my legs. "I'd been sent to do surveillance on a bunch of dangerous drug dealers when out of nowhere saving a sweet, wide-eyed journalist became my mission instead."

Cooper speared his hands through my hair and tilted my face up to his. "Wide-eyed, huh?"

"As a Boy Scout."

He chuckled. "I still can't believe that was you. I mean, I can because I've seen the way you move, but it didn't click until you were literally right there in front of me wearing the mask that…"

"You'd invited me into your apartment and bed."

"Shh." Cooper pushed a finger against my lips that I quickly nipped at. "Don't remind me."

"Why? You didn't enjoy it?"

"I'm pretty sure you know I enjoyed it, but…it's embarrassing how desperate I acted. The way I all but begged you for it."

That made me laugh, and I fell back into the couch. "Have you forgotten where you found me the night you begged me to come back? I'd been following you. I made up an excuse to talk to you at the coffee shop. Hell, I was outside your window on your fucking fire escape because I wanted one more look at you. You want to talk desperate?"

Cooper ran his eyes down over me, the heat swirling in them making it obvious I had no reason to feel embarrassed, and neither did he. There'd been a connection between us from the second we met.

His wrong place, wrong time moment turned out to be the exact opposite since it had brought him to me, and now that I had him, I was never going to let him go.

"Speaking of my masked vigilante lover…"

I growled. "I fucking *love* that nickname."

Cooper smirked, pulled his hand free, and walked over to his backpack on the floor. He picked it up and brought it to the couch.

"I believe I have something that belongs to him." He unzipped the bag and rustled around in it, then pulled out my missing leather glove—the one I'd left behind in his apartment the first night. "Lose something?"

He tossed it to me, a smirk on his lips, and I caught it and ran my fingers over it. "I was wondering if you found it."

"*Found* it?" Cooper dropped his bag to the floor and climbed on my lap, straddling my thighs. "Not only did I find it, I slept with it, had coffee with it, worked on my story with it and"—he leaned in to whisper—"got myself *off* with it."

"Fuuuck. " My head fell back on the couch. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Definitely not. Especially now that I found you." He kissed his way up to my ear. "I spent hours searching for you online. Wondering who the man in the alley was that night… Who the man was in my bed… In me. Were you ever going to tell me?"

"I did one better than that. I showed you."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean."

"I don't know," I said, running my hands down his hips to grip his ass. "You seemed pretty infatuated with this Lachlan guy. How could he compete?"

"Infatuated, huh? Is that what you think I am?" He raised a brow, daring me to answer.

I held his chin between my fingers, bringing his mouth toward mine. "It's what I know you are. But you're missing the point."

"No, I'm not," Cooper said, leaning in for a kiss. "I think, deep down, I knew. I had to. I don't just go falling for men left and right, you know."

"No?" I murmured, caught up in the heady look he was giving me.

“The only two guys I’d looked twice at in forever and they happen to be the same man. I think that’s a pretty clear indication I have a type.” He wound his arms around my neck and whispered over my lips, “And it’s you.”

But before his mouth crashed down on mine, he leaned back suddenly and reached for the glove, then grabbed my hand and slipped it on me.

As I flexed and smirked at him, he winked.

“Now it’s you.”

I shook my head, not sure he was really ready for all that entailed, but I wasn’t going to talk him out of it. Instead, I shut him up with a kiss, one I hadn’t been sure I’d ever get again after he found out what I’d been keeping from him.

But Cooper continued to amaze. I couldn’t get enough of his endless curiosity or his insatiable desire for me. He was fucking crazy for that, but then, that made two of us.

I licked my way into his mouth and clenched the back of his neck with my gloved hand, and his soft moan reminded me of just how much Cooper got off to being dominated. It made me hard, made me want to throw him down on the couch and—

He ripped his mouth away, breathless, but there was an anxious look in his eyes.

“This isn’t…” he started, only to sit back on his heels. “I mean, we’re not… I’m not…”

“Cooper, this is the only time I’ll tell you this, but spit it out.”

That brought a faint smile to his lips, but it disappeared just as quickly.

“This isn’t over, right? Like, I don’t just go home and never see you again?”

“Why would you say that?”

“I just mean because the whole reason you brought me to Libertine was that I was in danger, but now Mick and his guys have been taken care of, so…” He didn’t meet my eyes as he said, “I just…go home?”

I reached for his face, forcing him to look me in the eyes.

“Scout. What do *you* think?”

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COOPER

One Month Later…

IT WAS AFTER eight p.m. when I finally typed the last line of my article due ASAP for the weekend paper. The story had come across my desk a couple days ago with a deadline for tonight, which was accounting for the late hour.

“You still here?” Jill, one of my new colleagues, said as she powered off her computer at the cubicle across the room.

“Wrapping it up now.” I sent it off to the editor of New York News Now and stretched back in my chair, lifting my arms over my head so my body cracked after hours of sitting.

“I’m meeting up with a few friends at the Crown Bar if you wanna come? They make a killer Cosmo, and I’m parched.”

I grinned, her words only reminding me to call Hannah this weekend to catch up.

“While that sounds like a good time, I’m just gonna go home and pass out. It’s been a wild week.”

That was an understatement. In the month since Mick and his crew had been taken into custody, more had come out about their ties to other fatal drugs across the U.S. and into South America. It felt like there was something new every day, and even though I hated having to even think about them, I couldn’t help but feel like I was finally doing my part in shining a light on the situation.

Not to mention, New York City was brimming with endless scandals and possibilities, making it hard to choose where to narrow my focus.

“Pass out, huh? On a Friday night? Lame.” Jill slid her purse strap over her shoulder and shot me a wink. “See you Monday, Patterson.”

“Have fun.” I powered down my workstation, gathered up my belongings, and headed out. It was still bitterly cold, and yesterday’s snowfall still lined the sidewalks and streets as I walked to the train with the quickness of a focused but frozen New Yorker.

Not that I truly considered myself one yet, but the city was definitely growing on me. After my story about Mick hit the press, I was offered a job with several outlets around the city before ultimately settling on the one who’d taken a chance on me in the first place.

New York News Now was my dream job, and even late nights like this made me grateful I’d moved here in the first place. I had Alex to thank for that. I hoped wherever he was, he was at peace and could now rest easy knowing the ones responsible for his death couldn’t hurt anyone else.

And it sure as hell helped me to sleep at night.

“Oh no you don’t,” Ms. Edith said before I made it fully in the door. “You promised you’d stop by Levain and bring me a dozen—”

Her mouth snapped shut when I pulled a blue tin out of my backpack and handed it to her.

“Your assortment of cookies, Ms. Edith, freshly made just for you.”

She lifted the top of the tin to inspect the contents, and then she looked back at me with narrowed eyes. “Well. You can follow an order, I suppose.”

Ha. She had no idea just how well.

“Anything else you want me to run out and get for you, just let me know.” I smiled and started up the stairs, leaving her to stare after me, no doubt trying to find another reason for an argument. Clearly she hadn’t expected me to actually follow through after her comment the other day about Levain Bakery, but it was fun to surprise her.

And piss her off at the same time.

I chuckled to myself and jogged up to the fifth floor, the route a lot easier now that I’d gotten in better shape. When I reached my door, I unlocked and shoved it open and my empty apartment greeted me with silence.

Some might find that lonely in a town as busy as this, but after a long, arduous workweek it was exactly what I needed. A warm bath and a drink wouldn't be bad either, but I'd just have to settle for a glass of wine on the shower ledge.

I dropped my bag on my desk and peeked out the only window of my place, watching as the snow fell lightly on the fire escape. There was something so pretty about the way it dusted the old iron railings, and my lips tipped into a wistful smile.

Nights like this always made me thankful I'd been brave enough to follow my convictions and make the trek to the big city. People had doubted me—hell, I'd doubted myself. But here I was months later, not only surviving but thriving.

I had a steady job, which meant a steady paycheck, a landlord who'd finally decided I wasn't a total ingrate, and nothing but my future to look forward to. Compared to the drug-infested alley I'd stumbled into during my first couple of weeks here, I'd say things were looking up.

I grinned as I opened the microwave and put a wrapped burrito in. So maybe my food choices didn't exactly reflect the "thriving" part yet, but I was happy.

After my quick bite, I poured that glass of wine I'd promised myself and headed to the shower, where I stood until the hot water turned lukewarm, letting the heat work its magic on my tense shoulders. Hours at a computer was nothing new, but with the overtime I'd been putting in, they were definitely protesting a little this week. I really needed to invest in a better setup, maybe a standing desk.

I drained the rest of my wine and climbed out of the shower, placing the empty glass on the counter before I dried off and wrapped a towel around my waist. The alcohol and steam had done its job in relaxing my body and mind, and as I stared at myself in the mirror I slicked my hair back from my face, smiling at the ring on my middle finger.

It glinted under the light as I twisted it. It was a new addition, and I couldn't stop looking at it as I made my way to the bed and pulled back the covers.

I tossed the towel aside and climbed in, more than ready to wrap myself in the smooth sheets I'd splurged on a couple of weeks ago.

I didn't bother with my tablet, nothing on there sparking my interest more than stretching out on this bed in bliss and staring out the window.

The snow was starting to come down even harder now, and I was grateful I'd gotten home before it got too bad out. Warm and cozy in my bed, safe, no unwelcome intruders…

Closing my eyes, I stretched out, pushing my arms up under my pillow, and that was when I heard it.

The slight screech my window made as it was pushed up slowly.

Anticipation flooded my body as the bed dipped near my feet. I opened my eyes to see a shadow in the dark climbing up over me, their face shielded beneath a hood and mask.

"I was wondering if the snow was going to keep you away," I said as he lowered over me and placed his hands on either side of my head.

"Nothing could keep me away from you."

Every part of me heated at his words, even as the melted snowdrops from his trench coat fell onto my bare skin.

I usually played into my pre-Lachlan character on nights like this, the one who had welcomed his masked vigilante, no questions asked. But tonight, I wanted to see his face, and when I reached up to push his hood back and lower his mask, he let me.

"Trying to call the shots tonight?" he teased.

"Just feeling a little greedy." I unbuttoned his coat and pushed it off his shoulders, and he sat up and took it off the rest of the way.

Like that, hovering over me in the moonlight, I'd never seen anyone so stunning or savage in their beauty. He'd hate my saying that, but it was true.

As he lowered back over me, I arched up into him and entwined our fingers. He kissed where I wore his platinum ring, the one he'd given me—which hadn't been for any other reason than I was "his," and he wanted that claim on me somewhere.

And I was only too happy to have it. The ring *and* the claim.

"It's been a long forty-eight hours," I whispered against his lips as I slipped my hands under his Henley.

"Well, *someone* had an important story and told me to stay away."

"I didn't say stay away. I said you were a distraction—"

"And you'd be finished quicker if you could work on it on your own." His lips curled over the top of mine. "If that's not a 'get lost,' I don't know what is."

“Aw… So I’m feeling greedy and you’re feeling needy.” I chuckled, and Lachlan nipped at my lower lip.

“Careful, Scout.”

I trembled at the nickname he’d fallen back into calling me. “Or what?”

“Or I’ll tease you all night until you’re begging me to take you.”

“That’s supposed to be a threat?”

“No, that’s a fucking promise.” He kissed his way from my lips to my ear. “And I’ve had forty-eight hours to think of ways to make you cave.”

I turned my head on the pillow, capturing his lips in a crushing kiss, groaning into his mouth and arching up into the solid body pinning me to the mattress.

Lachlan tore his mouth from mine too soon for my liking, then shoved the covers aside. When my naked body came into view he cursed.

“Have I mentioned how much I love you?”

I kicked the sheet and quilt the rest of the way free and grinned at him, my body on full display for his hungry eyes. “Not since the last time you snuck in my window.”

Lachlan ran his fingers up my thigh to where my erection throbbed. “Then let me rectify that.” He wrapped his fist around me, and I took his face between my hands and pulled him down on top of me as he whispered, “I love you.”

Those words were still so new, so exciting to hear from him as he stared down at me like I was the most important thing in his entire world. I speared my hands through the silky strands of his hair, holding him close. “I love you too.”

“Good, because I have a proposition for you.”

“He says while casually stroking my cock.”

He chuckled and gave me a quick squeeze. “Want me to stop?”

“Definitely not.”

His dark eyes roamed over my face. “Move in with me.”

My heart stuttered. “What?”

“You heard me.”

I’d *thought* I had. But either he was joking and I wasn’t laughing, or… he was serious.

When I could form words again, I managed, “That’s a rude joke, Lachlan Stone.”

“I’m not joking. Move in with me.” The intensity in his gaze had me slowly realizing that he wasn’t just saying this on the fly. He’d put a good deal of thought behind it.

I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest, and all I could do to alleviate how much I was feeling was to play it off. Especially with his hand still wrapped around my cock. “Well, I don’t know. Does this place have a helipad?”

“Is that a dealbreaker?”

“It might be. I never know when I might need one.”

His lips curled into a sexy half-smile. “Then you’re in luck.”

Those talented fingers of his began to stroke me again, and I moaned. “Can I give up *this* place, with its amazing square footage and incredible view—”

“And your favorite neighbor.”

“Ah yes, who can forget Ms. Edith? I don’t know if she’ll let me go that easily.”

“I’m sure you can pay her off with more of those cookies you bought earlier.”

My mouth fell open, and I began to laugh. “You seriously *are* a stalker, aren’t you? It’s a good thing you’re so fucking hot.”

Lachlan tightened his fingers around my dick, and just like that, I stopped laughing and pushed up into his hand.

His lips brushed beneath my ear, his hot breath on my skin making me shiver. “I didn’t hear you say yes.”

No, he didn’t, and that was only because he needed a taste of his own medicine.

“Tell you what,” I said. “Why don’t you do your best to convince me and maybe you’ll hear that word come out of my mouth tonight?”

A gleam entered his eyes at the challenge, and before I could tell him I was only teasing, he flipped me onto my stomach and pinned my hands up by my head.

And then he spent the rest of the night *convincing* me.

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading
SAVAGE (Park Avenue Kings #1)

We hope you enjoyed Cooper and his masked vigilante's love story. It's been *so* much fun finally being able to share our kings with you, and Lachlan was the perfect man to start with.

Up next, our DEVILISH King.
The only question is...
Who will we find when *his* mask is removed?

DEVILISH
Park Avenue Kings #2

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SPECIAL THANKS

Wow…

Can you believe we are at the end of *another* book and diving headfirst into this brand new series?
Something we couldn’t do without our amazing team.

Hang Le, what can we say? *You* are an absolute genius. We don’t know how you do it, but whenever we come to you with an idea, you somehow manage to take it out of our heads and bring it to life in the most extraordinary way.
Arran, our awesome editor, who is almost as sarcastic and blunt as we are, thank you for always finding room for us in your busy schedule. We couldn’t do this without you.
Linda at Foreword PR, who puts up with our crazy and even sometimes matches it. But that’s why we get along so well, and how we can keep track of what we’re supposed to be doing and when. Without you we’d be a hot mess.
Gel with Tempting Illustrations for all the original and super sexy teasers you’ve come up with us for this book. And Ren Saliba for the gorgeous cover images of the kings. Becca, our FairyPlotMother, for taking the time to brainstorm our chaotic ideas and to help us narrow them down to where they actually make sense.

And most importantly, you, our readers. Whether you're in our private reader group, The Naughty Umbrella, on our Instagram or Tiktok, or one of our Patrons, we appreciate each and every one of you so much for picking up our books. It means so much to us that you'd spend your time falling in love with the worlds we have created.

We'd also like to give a special shout out to the awesome Brellas on our Patreon who helped brainstorm with us. Marianne for "Libertine" (you now know where we decided to use this!), Dora for "Elixir," Jacqueline M and A for Alessio's "Negroni," and all the Brellas who helped us vote on polls.

We are having the best time creating this new world where our kings work behind the scenes to get everything their hearts desire, and we can't wait to bring you each and every one of their stories.

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ALSO BY BROOKE BLAINE

South Haven Series

A Little Bit Like Love

A Little Bit Like Desire

The Unforgettable Duet

Forget Me Not

Remember Me When

Hate to Love You Series

Bedhead

L.A. Liaisons Series

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Hooker

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Lust. Hate. Love

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Dare You

Dare Me

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Scandalous Park Avenue Prince

Possessive Park Avenue Prince

Salacious Park Avenue Prince

Notorious Park Avenue Prince

Park Avenue Kings

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SAVAGE

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Wrapped Up in You

All I Want for Christmas…Is My Sister's Boyfriend

Jingle Bell Rock

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ABOUT BROOKE BLAINE

Brooke Blaine is a USA Today Bestselling Author best known for writing romantic comedy and M/M romance. Her novels lead with humor and heart, but Brooke never shies away from throwing in something extra naughty that will scandalize her conservative Southern family for life (bless their hearts).

She's a choc-o-holic, lives for eighties bands (which means she thinks guyliner is totally underrated), believes it's always wine o'clock, and lives with the coolest cat on the planet—her Ragdoll/Maine Coon mix, Jackson Agador Spartacus.

Brooke's Links
Brooke's Newsletter
Brooke & Ella's Naughty Umbrella
www.BrookeBlaine.com

If you'd like to join Brooke & Ella's Patreon for a look behind the scenes, to read chapters early, to get ARCs first, this is the place right here!

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ABOUT ELLA FRANK

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Temptation series*, including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite *Fallen Angel series.* Her *Prime Time series* has been praised as “highly entertaining!” and “sexy as hell!”

A life-long fan of the romance genre, Ella is best known for her steamy, heartfelt, M/M romances.

If you’d like to join Ella & Brooke’s Patreon for a look behind the scenes, to read chapters early, to get ARCs first, this is the place right here!

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You can also find them in their Facebook Group

The Naughty Umbrella
(Facebook Group)

And if you would like to talk with other readers who love Ella’s character’s from her Chicagoverse, you can find them **HERE** at
Ella Frank’s Temptation Series Facebook Group.

Want to stay up to date with all things Ella?
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